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On Being Seen or For Those Who Break Like Me

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ON BEING SEEN OR FOR THOSE WHO BREAK LIKE ME

by

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B. A. December 2015, Virginia Wesleyan University

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ABSTRACT

ON BEING SEEN OR FOR THOSE WHO BREAK LIKE ME

Shanisha K. Branch
Virginia Wesleyan University, 2015
Director: Prof. John McManus

The nature of truly seeing is something I've had a hard time grappling with. If you understand the difficulty of seeing and wanting others to see you that same, then these pages are for you.

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for those who desire to be seen

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I'd like to thank God for gifting me a journey worthy enough to be told on a page. Thank you, mamma, for loving me despite me. To my family and loved ones, thank you for knowing me well enough, and giving me room enough, to breathe and heal and belong. I'm also incredibly indebted to coffee and espresso as I would not have been able to complete this book without it. Finally, I'm grateful for all the time I was blind to my fears and anxieties and pain because they allowed me to truly see.

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Preface: On the Nature of Seeing

I've always found it difficult to see. My poor eyesight I inherited from my father, which didn't make life easy. I remember asking to sit closer to the chalkboard than the rest of my classmates in elementary school. My teacher had made several attempts to write or call home asking my mother to get my eyes checked by a doctor. But, to me, I never found it much of a problem. I had been seeing with my blurry vision for as long as I could remember. Changing anything about that didn't seem like much of a big deal... until I got my first pair of glasses.

During that magical time before I started wearing them (and much of the time after), I had trouble truly seeing. Even though my vision had cleared up physically, I had a terrible time believing what I saw as true. Up until that point, I had always saw myself through the lenses of others. And I had never seen it as a handicap. It just came natural to me. Being the youngest of three girls, I often felt I had to morph into the person others saw in me. And so, I did. I call this portion of my life by default or "Other," which makes up for the first section of my memoir. My vision, for the majority of my childhood and adolescence, was dictated by others so much so that I had no agency. In fact, I'd say it was ignored. This one pleasure (or commodity) was stolen from me so often that I did not know how to operate when I actually had it.

Seeing, for many, is simple, often viewed as easy. Some even tact the phrase: *believing is seeing* together to describe the act. But, in my case, *seeing is believing*. Many find it a blessing to have perfect eyesight, *that* kind of 20/20 vision I've dreamed of. Other, more realistic people, view perfection as unattainable, an uncommon phenomenon only gods can produce. This kind of vision I was not privy to until my teenage years which makes up for the second section of my book called: "Self." In those days, I desperately tried to *see* how I saw myself. I often questioned in what ways I could see myself more sophisticatedly. Questions like "Who Are You and What

Do You Do?” scared me because I had no real ideas. I’d say this was largely influenced by my mother. She, being a single parent since my dad was forced to trade blue jeans for orange jumpsuits, had wanted to shield me from the ugly of life. And I had no problems with that. I imagine she wanted me to be much more than what she was, strong like her, and beautiful too, but some things I know I could never be. Such is the issue with seeing yourself through the eyes of others, I could no longer see me. Even though I tried hard to satisfy my mother with my actions and in personality, I felt like a failure deep down. I couldn’t be as effervescent in my personality as my sisters nor as bright in skin tone. And I felt, she had resented me for it, as if I was too much like my father.

The problem with seeing something is that you can’t *unsee* it. Believe me, I’ve tried. But my problem was twofold: I saw a lot and believed what I saw as true. Reality, for me, had been jaded so much so that I believed everything that happened to me could only be bad. These ideas dominate the middle section of my book: “Self” when I experience my first suicidal thought/attempt. I am no stranger to trauma, in fact, I’d say it was a welcome guest most of my life.

My mother’s gaze and my father’s blindness to my being became a kind of haunting. They both are present throughout my book, my father more so than my mom. I found it disadvantageous to discuss myself without discussing the people who’ve influenced me. Originally, the text started out as an in depth look at the black body: natural hair, skin complexion, body shape and such. And these are worthy quests to discuss and, indeed, are throughout the project; however, I did not understand it yet to be *mine*. I pride myself on being deeply personal, looking inward to explain the outward actions, reflecting on me to understand why and how I interact (or not) with others. So, it had not felt true yet until I included my mother.

I figured she would dominate the text and does. However, my mother's actions in my eyes, as I know and have known her, have been largely influenced by my father. And, I must say, his presence dominates the text more so than my hers. I use the word *presence* here lightly. Out of the 20 strings that compose the text, he is mentioned directly in three of them. One sentence (or two) that summarizes his presence is: "It didn't matter if he was there or not because I knew what to expect. I knew he couldn't possibly care enough about me to show some kindness," from the section, "What Forgetting it Does." This is mentioned in conjunction with my mother having to persuade him to come to my high school graduation, which leads to my subsequent suicide attempt. My wish, initially, was to leave him out of the project all together, but, in a sense, I feel more sure of myself while telling the truth about how my vision of myself was skewed by his presence. I've been told (more times than I can count) that *what happens in this house stays in this house* which makes up for all of the mental health issues swarming the book. Most black families (I'll speak for my mom) say this for fear of having strangers in their business. However, I've learned that once something happens to me (whether traumatic or not) then it's no longer anyone else's story, it is mine.

My mother, on the other hand, is mentioned in every string both directly and indirectly. The idea of trying to write without her lurking over my shoulder still haunts me. But, again, her story is now mine. A good summation of her character from the story itself is: "I feared she [my mother] would see my weakness in letting someone else control my emotions, but I was 15 and that was normal... I never saw my mother bleed. She was wonder woman. She took the bravery of my father being gone, the strain of working two and three jobs, and the courage of raising three girls all at once. I still wonder if her blood runs red or if it runs at all" – from "Strong Black Woman or Who I Tried to Be" My Mother is a force this book has tried to contain and

contextualize; however, I have not found (or maybe never will) the *right* way to explain her. Even when she is described as a three-dimensional character, I still feel her entire essence isn't. This may be normal for nonfiction writers. However, what is painfully evident, is how much she absorbs and steals my agency, whether knowingly or not.

The majority of the book explains me: my maturation and stubborn personality. Episodes of trauma, as mentioned earlier, are present but also moments of self-identification and agency of which I plan to add more. These episodes of agency are sometimes peppered with scenes involving my sisters. Their presence in my life also has the same effect as my mother's: they are agency mongers. They have both been my foil characters my entire life. Naturally, their influence has forced me to defend my own happiness while valuing our differences. This newfound agency comes out best in the section "Seen" as I wish to be seen (or tire of being seen) by others in ways, I've never given permission to be viewed.

As mentioned before, my father's leaving, my lack of true agency, the heaviness of trying to be everything other than what I wanted to be, as well as pressures from *regular degular* life reached a boiling point. And this point was only subsided by the fact that I *really* wanted to be seen.

The musings of Kiese Laymon's *Heavy* gave voice to ways on how to discuss the black body. This text has been one I've revisited throughout the formation of my memoir for its beautiful explanation. In so many words, he discusses his life in terms of his body: being mistreated, misunderstood and misappropriated. There are places in his memoir where his life is so traumatic that he eats to cope with the pain. And I find this compelling in that actions are never (in my opinion) just actions. I believe they are always (or, at least, should be) connected to a thought or emotion. As it relates to *On Being Seen*, I discuss that black hair acts as a layer of

microaggression embedded in the black community, in a very literal and personal sense. In more specific terms I describe that, “For as long as I can remember, my hair has felt like something I should be at war with. Like a piece of me that never wanted to cooperate. A silent, tragic part of me that needed to be tamed and deserved to be mistreated.” – from “The Transition or Why I Did It.”

When most people think of *hair*, they think of it as a superficial force; however, it can and is very powerful when used to signal pivotal points in life. As such, each time I entered into a new season or progress, rather, I changed my hair. In the black community, choosing to *go natural* is like the epitome of connecting to your roots. It’s an act of rebellion. This rebellious act isn’t always accepted or valued or even, seen as beauty. More personally, my mother’s acceptance of the natural hairstyle has never been. And so, this act of taking back agency (as my mother had repeatedly relaxed my hair as a child) is one I could never forget.

So, in this book you’ll find a journey. I’ve always been one to love self-discovery and, in many ways, the journey through these pages is one toward that. But I wish it were that easy. The most challenging part of discovery is using fresh eyes. I hadn’t developed fresh eyes to see myself until I began allowing others’ view (as well as my own) to not control me. This makes up for the last section of my book called, “Seen.” My attempt in ending my life can only be described as a need to be seen in that I did not believe anyone really saw me. As a matter of fact, I don’t believe I *really* saw me either. In the last section, I combat these moments of trauma with owning my own body. My appearance: skin complexion, hair, body shape/size and ailments were characteristic I used to be ashamed of. My father’s abandonment, I thought, was a tragedy. My mother’s control and domineering perspective, I assumed, would last forever. And so, these

pages are filled with as much agency and fear and ugly and joys I could force myself to submit on a page. With hopes, of choosing to live those moments out more and more each day.

Section I: Other

The Ruin or When He left

My father was arrested when I started first grade. I remember because I wore a pink dress that day (which I hated) with a white floral design that looked like dog vomit. I had pink beads at the ends of my nappy ponytails to match. My first day at Highland Biltmore was eventful to the point that I couldn't keep the details to myself. As soon as end-of-day announcements came on over the tiny speaker box in my classroom, I packed my colored pencils and homework sheets neatly into my backpack and ran home past my sisters, excited to tell my father all about it. I quickly fell into the "daddy's girl" persona, so I'm told by my sisters. In their eyes I was his favorite. I arrived home with all of my school-girl giddiness only to find that he was gone. The events of that day never quite sit right in my memory. I always remember it in pieces for the puzzle was never completed throughout my life.

"He had to leave, Nee," her mom explains. Her mom is not usually home at this time of day, so she thought it strange to see her car was parked in the driveway. Her father walked everywhere he went and didn't mind getting rides with people he knew from the complex they lived in.

"Where'd he go? Is he coming back? He didn't even say bye," she says, looking around at his flight jacket on the kitchen chair and pack of Newport's on the table. He must have left in a hurry. She and all of her sisters are crowded around the tiny living room sofa. She is sitting on the floor with her sight-words notebook tumbling through her book bag laid out next to her brown thighs and dog-vomit dress. Her sisters, Shyanne and Shanelle, are seated on the couch with their book bags still around their backs and her mother was standing still, next to the entrance of the two-bedroom apartment. The kitchen window beside her mother is shining the afternoon light on her smooth, light-brown skin.

“Your father got into some trouble with the police, so they had to take him away,” her mom tells them. Her words sound strong like the backs of black and brown women who carry the burdens of immature men, but she looks at them with care in her eyes.

“We can go visit him as soon as he’s able to get visitors,” her mom continues unmoved by the faces of frustration and confusion of her daughters. While her mother is speaking, tears start to make their way from her eyes and down the sides of her brown cheeks. She can hear small sobs coming from her mouth as her eyebrows bunch up like crumbled paper. Her sisters are staring at their nails or picking at the creases of the sofa cushion.

“Stop that, Shanisha,” her mom snaps.

“There’s nothing you can do to change it, so don’t cry over it. He made his choice now we have to live with it,” her mom says firmly. Her mother walks slowly over to her daughter to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

“Now, tell me about your first day of school,” her mother says, her voice like the calm of a new morning.

And just like that, nothing else was said of my dad’s arrest that day, mostly because I was too afraid to ask. My sisters did not ask about it but I’m sure they knew, as well as I, that it had something to do with the money he would bring home every night. Being the youngest of three girls, I learned quickly how to observe and not ask. Whenever I asked my mom about seeing him or writing letters, she would be uncharacteristically quiet. I could tell she was weighing the options in her brain as if to tell her daughter “no” to this would ruin her for life or to tell her daughter “yes” would ruin her in different ways that daddy/daughter relationships should never be. Periodically, I would receive handwritten letters from my father, little pictures he would draw, and secret messages to give to my mother for him. But those letters stopped when I got to

high school. My mother communicated with him in sparks like speaking with him caused her more pain than joy. Something about my mother's strength was solidified after his leaving.

The next day we piled into my mom's Honda Civic to hunt for new houses. We drove by two houses that looked promising and stopped at a third to look inside. It was in a quiet neighborhood in Portsmouth. It's not far from the apartment complex we used to live in, but the neighbors are completely different. The family who lives across the street is getting ready to leave their driveway and waves at us. *Why are these white people so nice?* I waved to be polite. Shyanne just stared and Shanelle smiled her fake school-picture-day smile. The house has a yellow door with purple flowers on the front wrap around porch. I touch one of the petals to find out if it's real and give it to my sister standing next to me. My mom and the homeowner are already in the house discussing prices and square footage.

"Leave that alone, Nee," Shanelle told me after I hand her the petal.

"Look, it's a real flower! You think she'll let us keep it when we move in?" I said with stars in my eyes.

"You really think these white people is gonna let us keep all this stuff in this house? Stop touchin' stuff before mom has to pay for it," she snatched the petal and shoved it in the pocket of her jean jacket. We moved into the kitchen where my mom and Shyanne are. The homeowner is showing them the kitchen window that looks out over a big backyard with a makeshift pond and wooden swing. *I don't think I've seen a yard so green.* I tried to picture what Shanelle saw in me: I was a little brown girl with nappy hair and dusty shoes running my dirty fingers all over the furniture in the house. So, my sister's frustration was warranted.

"Will you be moving in with your husband as well?" the man trying his hardest to sell his house asked my mother. The kitchen is bigger than the one at our old apartment and it has a

dining room attached. I'm sure my mom loved that part because she always made it so that we ate dinner together, no matter what. The house has three bedrooms upstairs. My mom says that me and Shanelle will have to share rooms, but I'm used to it. At our old apartment I shared a room with both of my sisters. And we certainly didn't have an upstairs. My father said that it wouldn't be like that always. He said that whenever he came home with cash money. But my mom hated it because they would get into an argument whenever he showed her the wad of cash.

"And how did you get that money?" my mom would ask him.

"That don't matter now. I got this money for us, for our family," my dad would explain. I imagine my mother would roll her eyes and clasp both hands on her hips with her head tilted to one side. They would wait until they thought me and my sisters had fallen asleep to talk about this. But I always heard them. The walls in the apartment were so thin like my hair would be whenever I got a relaxer. Even when the doors were closed, the sounds spread.

"That's dirty money and you know it. Don't bring me or my daughters into that. What about them? What if you lose them? What if you get locked up?"

"Monica, I told you not to worry about that. Now let's just move on. I brought home pizza for the girls..." my dad would say with a stubborn stutter. He has light brown skin and terrible eyesight. He always had a cigarette in his right hand and a bottle of brown liquor on the nightstand. His glasses would rest on the top of his head because the heat would fog them.

"I don't care about that, Kim" my mom said. They would go back and forth like this all night sometimes. And from what I can remember, my mom never found out where the money came from. I'm sure she knew the truth, we all did. But we always had food to eat every night. So, it didn't matter much to me.

I looked up at my mother when the man asks her about her husband. I haven't seen my father since he left two years ago. So, I assumed she was thinking of some other man who is somewhere at work making money for us to buy this home, or another man who sees his family everyday and makes it to Christmas recitals and Sunday dinner; not my father who is a thousand miles away locked in a shameful place that doesn't allow visitors. I've gotten used to his absence, but I'm not used to everyone asking about him. The homeowner was a white man with pale skin and was wearing khaki pants. He and his family were there too, preparing to move from this house for a larger one in Virginia Beach, Va. Up until that point, they'd been really friendly; their daughter even showed me her pet fish outside in the pond. I don't like them asking about my dad, though.

"No, it will just be me and my girls," my mom said smiling. Since my dad left two years ago, my mother hardly mentions him. We've talked to him over the phone for the first two weeks after he "got into trouble." He sounded happy to hear from us, but my mom did most of the talking. A week later he was moved to a prison far away, more than two hours, so my mom said. And we never visited him, though she said that we would. My mother had to pick up more hours at her cleaning job and she got a part time job at Roses to make extra money. I saw her less and less. That's when Shyanne started acting more like mom than big sis. My home life stayed this way up until I went to middle school. Then things began to change in ways I didn't like. I didn't know I was going to be ruined even more.

My First Time or The Ruin II

I was 12 years old when I got my first relaxer. I remember the day distinctly because it burned my scalp and it bled for a week. I was overweight for my age and darker skinned than my sisters with nappy hair and my mother was sick of dealing with my unruly ends. When my mother brought me and my sisters to the hair salon one early Saturday morning, she made sure to prep me about the experience first.

“You have to sit very still while she applies it,” my mom coached.

“But what if I have to use the bathroom,” I asked innocently. It was the first time I’d been to the hair salon in downtown Portsmouth. My sisters had been going years before me. I hadn’t noticed how their hair transformed when they came back, or how my mother admired their hair much more than mine. The hair stylist who gave me my first taste of black womanhood, complimented me on my thick hair.

“Oh, my God! Your hair is so thick! I wish I had hair like yours,” she said. This went on and on right before she stole this precious commodity from me. The other women in the salon admired my hair too, as a sign, I assumed, of good genes but ones the whites hated to see in their front offices, giving them their filet mignon, and handling their important clients’ documents. I watched Cartoon network and Nickelodeon on her big-back television in the front of the salon. It was a small store front with warm hues of red and orange and décor with portraits of Nigerian, Congolese, or Cameroonian women in traditional dress on the walls. The salon always smelled of cinnamon and sweet vanilla thanks to the incense burning on the back counter.

I knew it was dangerous. The brown skinned lady doing my hair put on long black gloves before applying the white creamy-crack to my scalp, roots first. The Vaseline she applied around my ears, neck, and forehead where no match for the power the relaxer possessed.

“It’s burnin’,” I whined at the stylist. Her salon’s patronage is dwindling down. I waited and watched my sisters both get their relaxers done, not their first and definitely not their last. The press and curls were now my family’s new Saturday morning routine but it’s pretty much all smoke and mirrors. Nothing about what they were doing do their hair seemed real. I hated being there. We had probably been there about ten hours, way after my favorite *That’s So Raven* episodes aired on Disney channel. I hated that my mom spent so much money on straightening my hair. But most of all, I hated that everybody loved my thick hair but, still, let me go through with ruining it.

“Alright, time to rinse,” my stylist, Ms. Jennifer, told me. The timer went off, signaling my torture was over. With my mother’s eyes watching, Ms. Jennifer led me to the empty sink and started running the water.

“Keep your fingers out of your hair, please,” she said to me. I was in a hurry, as in all things, to get the tingling gunk out of my hair. I was twelve years old and already had a smart mouth. It felt weird. She pulled her fingers through my scalp with ease and I wondered when was the last time I had done that. *When was the last time I did not feel my cotton plush curls in my hair? When was the last time I had not loved seeing it in corn rolls and beads swinging down around my neck? And will I ever see it again?*

After she washed it out, she used a flat iron on high heat and followed it up with a curling iron. My mother watched Ms. Jennifer with delight in her eyes. My hair sizzled and cracked each time the heat touched it. I could tell it was different in ways I hadn’t known before because she pulled its full length down past my shoulders. Once she finished using heat directly on it, she pulled my strands into a funnel circling the middle of my scalp and enclosed it with a saran wrap

over my entire head. In the last process I was incredibly mesmerized by the intentionality of Ms. Jennifer to care for my new hair texture, that I briefly forgot I hated it.

Ms. Jennifer placed me under the dryer with the “silk wrap” on for about 30 minutes then it was finished. She used a wide tooth comb to gently and affectionately unravel the tight funnel on top of head. I could feel the strands falling around my ears and past the big, black swivel chair I was sitting in.

“How does she look?” Ms. Jennifer asks my mom.

“Like my little girl,” my mother says smiling. When I saw that my mother approved of my new look, I felt I should try and like it no matter how much I didn’t. Ms. Jennifer turns me around to the front of the mirror overlooking her styling station as my back was turned until then. I only smiled when I saw the end result.

“You look so pretty,” my sister, Shyanne, tells me from the bean bag chair she’s sitting on. My mother pushes one strand of straight hair behind my left ear and tells me, “you’re perfect.” And I did feel perfect, at least in my mom’s eyes. It was the first time my hair made me feel pretty.

How To Visit Your Father In Prison

1. Prepare for humiliation.

You are no longer a person. Like the prisoners, the guards treat you with contempt. It's like you're the one who committed a crime. They will ask you a myriad of questions relating to your relation to the inmate, reasons for visiting and why they should even let you inside this coveted place at all. None of the questions actually make sense to you. Why else would you be in a maximum-security prison unless visiting a loved one? Of course, you have a better way to spend your Saturday morning.

2. Remain calm when guards tell you to change clothes.

Dresses, shorts, skirts, short sleeves and, pretty much, any piece of clothing that shows too much skin is prohibited. Women's bare skin is said to make the prisoners "happy." An all-male prison can make any woman feel uncomfortable, so you are sure not to give any a reason to stare.

Since you are eight years old and begin visiting your father in prison with your mother and older sisters, your mother dresses you in turtlenecks and long skirts in the summer and crew necks and baggy jeans in the winter. You hate dressing like you are going to Sunday school, but you don't mind because you get to see your father... when seeing him was enough. When you grow older you remember what your mother tells before entering: "don't do anything unless I say so. Don't do anything unless the guards say so." Your issue with authority makes this concept even worse and you often confuse your mother's authority with the guards'.

3. Refuse to remove your bra.

Metal detectors are sensitive to all forms of metal including but not limited to jewelry, hair barrettes, belt buckles, shoelaces, and, surprisingly so, bra underwires. The rules of the correctional center are not to allow anyone in without being cleared by the detector. You will

walk through it three times, removing pieces of your clothing with each attempt. You are kind despite your frustration. But you will not choose to degrade yourself with the guard's suggestion to remove your bra, although you can put back on after you walk through the contraption.

When you are old enough to visit your father alone, not because your mother forces you, you're wise enough to know what and what not to wear. The woman in line before you has two kids with her, and a no-nonsense attitude; however, that fact does not stop her from going to the bathroom twice to adjust. Finally, she does remove the underwire of her bra. You wonder if the satisfaction of seeing her husband/ boyfriend/ child's father is enough for her to endure such humiliation.

4. Walk slowly.

Any sudden movements can cause the guards to think you are smuggling contraband between your thighs. Slower strides calm their baton-happy hands and clear speech tame their disrespectful tongues. Since you are ten the visits with your mother and sisters, begin dwindling to just you and your mom and, finally, just you. Your mother has her own reservations about seeing him. She only took the two-hour drive for you and your sisters' sake. But you are old enough to feel however you'd like to about your father. And your sisters, well, they made up their mind that he'd never change. You notice once that when you finally win entry into the building with your mother that her eyes begin to swell with tears at the creases. But they don't drop or trickle. You wonder if your mother has cried for her husband before and if this is the moment her tears ran out.

5. Take the pictures.

When you are 10 your mother makes you take pictures with your father during one visit. The visit itself was insignificant, was not a holiday nor a birthday. You know it is to preserve the

moment. You and your sisters are led outside on a Spring day where the facility is hosting family portraits for twice the price of JCPenny's. You know your mother can't afford them because she borrowed money from your grandmother to buy the stuffy dresses you and your sisters are wearing. So, you smile when the photographer asks everyone to say cheese. You are defiant when the inmate/ photographer forces you to sit on your father's lap instead of standing next to him like your sisters but concede anyway.

6. Sit with your back to the guards.

Prisoners are to face the guards at all times but, in case you forget, you are not the one locked up. You have the privilege of moving freely. However, they tell you to walk around the corners of the room. Before you sit down at the square table you try to make small talk with the guards in case anything happens, you want them to remember you as one of the "good ones." Before your mother adds a chair for your oldest sister, she tells you to sit on the left side of where your father will be seated.

When your dad walks out of the back door, you feel like it's a show. You don't know where they come from or how they are released from their primitive chains. You watch three men come out of the same door before him and each time you anticipate your dad's arrival. You understand this *anticipation* to be the cycle of his presence in your life.

7. Don't eat the food.

Stale cheeseburgers and burnt popcorn are the smells you can never forget. The visitation room smells like something's been sitting out too long but more like spoiled clothes and gym sneakers, just nasty funk. You will grow to hate the funk. Your father will welcome the microwaved grease and fats as a necessary comfort. But you know the vending machines haven't been updated with new food since the last time you visited him a month ago. You will trace the

quarters and dimes your mom brings inside in a plastic bag with your fingertips on the table. Because metal is a no-go, your mother has to put her money for the vending machines and her car keys inside of a clear plastic bag and send it through the X-ray machine as if she has something to hide. You walk through the metal detector with bare feet because your shoes and earrings travel through the X-ray machine too. You are mindful to wear socks for the rest of your visits no matter how hot it gets outside.

8. Talk about nothing.

You know the purpose of visits are to save face for your mother. You had been bugging her for weeks to see your father since he first vanished when you were eight. So, you try to make the best of them despite your indignation. Over the course of many more visits than you can count, you and your family settle into “catching up” on nothing. Your father will ask about his parents, your mother’s parents, your aunts and uncles, your grades in school, your sisters’ grades, and, finally, he and your mother will hog the conversation. You spend the rest of the 45 minutes making faces at your sisters or spinning quarters on the hard, plastic block-sized table.

9. Smile when your father asks you if you’ve had any trouble.

It’s okay to lie about this. There’s no need to give him a reason to fuss. You know from the way he talks about the guards that the slightest bit of irritation can take him over the edge. You notice the weight your father has lost since you last saw him, his beer belly disappearing week by week. You also notice there is a scratch above his eyes and his eyeglasses are smudged way beyond repair. You try to spit shine them but that won’t work anymore. You wonder if this is because he’s been fighting with the guards or other inmates. You never ask him this though, you know there are many horrors an American prison can offer. And you know your father is not one

for words. So, you assume in your ten-year-old mind, that he got the dirty glasses and fight-night face from scratching himself in his sleep.

Strong Black Woman or Who I Tried to Be

“I want to switch classes,” I responded, after my mother’s incessant questioning of me.

“Why, Nee,” she pressed more.

“Because I don’t like *that* band class,” I finally spit out between sobs.

It was the first week of my freshmen year in high school and I was unmistakably placed in the advanced band class, when no other freshman was placed in advanced band. I resolved to march straight to my counselor’s office and request my schedule be changed the next day. My mother didn’t know this though. I feared she would see my weakness in letting someone else control my emotions, but I was 15 and that was normal. I never saw my mother bleed. She was wonder woman. She took the bravery of my father being gone, the strain of working two and three jobs, and the courage of raising three girls all at once. I still wonder if her blood runs red or if it runs at all. She absorbed hardship and heartache like water to clay. She only broke in private for I never saw her strength waiver.

“Is someone bothering you,” my mom said flatly. I rocked my head up and down to confirm.

“Shanelle! Who’s bothering your sister?!” my mom yelled downstairs to my sister who was also in the same band class. She was a sophomore and sat behind me in the clarinet section. However, she had no idea the girls in the flute section were picking on me. The band room at Churchland High School was fashioned into a small oval shape setting. She had not noticed what was going on because she had a whole set of friends to occupy her time. After a quick conversation with her and my older sister, Shyanne, who wasn’t in the band but attended the same school; my mother came back into my room, gave some promising but disheartening

advice and concluded her speech with, “man up.” And because I felt exposed by mother and betrayed by my sisters, I agreed to stay and face the class and those immature girls.

To admit to my mother, I was being bothered wasn’t my mistake; it was that I admitted I let their bothering of me bother me. She always said I was a “special child” for my sisters didn’t behave like I did. In admitting this offense, I felt my difference exposed. My sisters naturally fell into the strong black woman prototype at an early age. They were less sensitive than me (or they never showed it) and I resented them for it. I was a flower child, avid day-dreamer, and book worm. An introvert at birth, I found solace in pages instead of people. My sisters, though, didn’t understand why I preferred to be alone instead of around them. They resolved to call me weird instead of different. Telling them I allowed someone to bother me shook up all the strength my mother tried to stuff into me. I had to prove that I was strong enough to take it; that I was worthy to be called strong. This was war.

The next day I faced the group of girls again. We were practicing the same boring procession of songs we learned in band camp. I rested my flute down to my side and blew air through it as to not make much sound.

“She pretend too much,” the second chair of the flute section chirped up with her head cocked to the left side. The rest of the section, all girls, turned their attention to me. I carried on like I didn’t care.

“She doin’ all that practicing and she still sound the same,” one girl said with a smirk on her face. Another girl looked at me with her face turned up as if something was smelly and said, “yeah, that’s why she still last chair.” I felt my face grow hot and I finally buried my face in my hands. My feet started to bounce then I brought my face up to look at the group.

“What you gonna do? Get your sister on me?” the same girl said and rolled her eyes.

Before I could answer my sister said, “Nee, what’s wrong with you?” Someone told her something was happening in the flute section, so she turned her eyes on to the front row of the class. Apparently during lunch my oldest sister, Shyanne, confronted the girls about them picking on me. But she didn’t tell me about it. She was a knuck-if-you-buck type of chick, always ready to fight. But I didn’t want her to fight this battle for me, even though she was used to doing so. Apparently both my sisters and the entire flute section had the same lunch block. Because I was a freshman, I took mostly freshmen classes and I was around the freshmen class most of my day. Advanced band class was the only exception.

“Nothing,” I told my sister.

“Oh, so I gotta call you Nee Nee to get a response from you?” the same girl kept coming back like a cockroach. It was like a spotlight in the entire class turned on and landed on me. Everyone stopped having side conversations and focused their attentions on the flute section. I had to come up with something quick to say because I ain’t no punk. I had strength. I had to win this battle. But I rolled my face into a ball and just sat there with my face in my hands cradled in my knees. Eventually, the band director came back from wherever he went to and began rehearsal again.

Ode to the Relaxer

you were the first time i felt pretty.
before then i played make-believe with my self-esteem
insisting my wild ends shouldn't be loved.
you were a lament of hate i could never break

so, i thought you were necessary
like the dawn that brings new mercy
i used you faithfully
ignoring the ruins.
the danger seemed much more freeing.

you made me feel welcomed
to black womanhood.
you accepted my knotty ends
as a conquerable quest
you gave me a sense of attractiveness.
i had not known hair held such power.

new moons give birth to emotions too full.
you were a lie fueled by other's preference
you made compliments feel better than kisses.
i cringed at the person looking back at me
even dressed you up in hair ties,
the illusion of pretty to match my need for make up

i felt so much hate for myself
while people thought *myself* was pretty.
then came the transition
the degradation and shame
from people who thought my hair should be liked by them,
the constant questioning
they couldn't fathom why i stopped.

your superpowers were creamy
your effect cracked my confidence.
and when i was rid of you and your magic
i finally felt worthy
like i belonged
like i always knew my knots deserved more.

Homecoming or The Stranger in the Yard

The first time my dad came home from prison I was in junior high. As I walked home from school, I thought aloud, “who is this stranger standing in my front yard.” By that time, I was an eighth grader, about 5’2” and wore a size 20-22 in blue jeans. My sisters were both in high school, so I walked home with the kids from the neighborhood. Some of my friends thought it would be cool to chase some white man’s demon dog. And sometimes they would chase the elementary school kids home too. Cradock Middle School and James Hurst Elementary School are on opposite ends of the neighborhood I lived and at 3pm on a weekdays, kids were spilling out of every corner.

That day, however, wasn’t anything special. In second period, I remember getting my flip-phone taken away by Ms. McNealy who had gotten tired of asking me to put it away. I resolved to tell my mother at the end of the week when she wasn’t working her second job as a call center consultant. School policy was to call home after an infraction like this; however, I managed to always give the wrong number when I filled out the take-home sheets in the beginning of the school year. My mother was never home long enough to fill it out and whenever I did ask her to fill out something from school, she asked me to explain exactly what it was first. So, I didn’t think dodging this bullet would hurt.

My father managed to smile when he saw me and with a small inclination of hope, I ran to him to make sure my horrible eyesight wasn’t fooling me.

“What you doin’ here?” I blurted out at him. I saw him and remembered the past immediately. I can’t bring myself to feel pleased or happy. He is standing in the front yard of the home my mom bought all on her own. I stopped at the violet lilacs potted on the front porch and

pick one up as I did before when I first saw the home. I smoosh the tiny petals between my index finger and thumb and watch the petal disform before throwing it to the ground.

“Baby girl, I bought you something,” my dad said while walking over to me. He stayed in the grass meadow leading up to the porch where I was standing. He pulled out an ice-cream bar from behind his back. When I was younger, he made it an adventure to go get ice-cream. My sisters and I would go with him to a Food Lion or Farm Fresh and he let us pick out whatever ice cream we wanted from the freezer section. He told us it was a game. He called it, “quick sand” because we had to sit in the shopping cart on top of the baby formula he took from the shelves. He would stack the carts high with boxes of Similac and told us each to sit on top or we would sink down. We would ride the rollercoaster right out of the store, bypassing the cashier and security cameras. I always thought he forget to pay for it, but I figured he did while me and my sisters were snatching ice-cream sundae bars out of the freezer section.

I blinked my eyes at him wondering if he heard what I said, or maybe he didn’t care. A part of me wants him to be dad but another part of me cannot forget the past. I wasn’t about to act like things were all peachy. We weren’t some big happy family, all of a sudden, just because my dad finally came home. No, he had to know how I felt, I wanted him to know how it felt. I wanted him to feel what it was like to grow up without a father at home or mother, for that matter. I wanted him to experience what it was like to have hope in someone only to have them abandon you.

When He Comes Back or Revolving Door

My father does not have any distinct features. He's of average height, light-skinned with gray hair all over save for his bald head. He turned 50 and was able to celebrate free. He looks years past his age and balding. Time in a penitentiary can do that to a man. His last vacation there lasted three years and he was released in July. There was no happy homecoming from our family, no welcome home meal from my sisters, and no one there to rehabilitate him to citizen life. There was no one wearing *Free My Dad* T-shirts, or rioters chanting, "set Kimathy free." But we could finally stop lying. Lying to our family about where our father's been on holidays and birthdays. Lying about what he does for work. Lying about why my mother works so much and has to borrow money from my uncles and aunts every so often. I stopped lying about it a long time ago.

My father had been gone since I started first grade. That's when the lying began. He had lost his beer belly entirely and shaved his head the day I saw him. My mother thought it would be nice for him to surprise me and my sisters to keep his homecoming a secret. He was released early for good behavior and time served. That was the second time my mother let him back in. He would leave three more times after that missing my graduation, prom and debutante cotillion. My mother had to coach me and my sisters like a drill sergeant on family secrets etiquette 101.

"If anyone asks, tell them he's at work," my mom says. We are in my mother's golden colored caravan on the way to another holiday social, some kind of game night at my uncle's house. The house is decorated with a white Christmas tree that reaches the ceiling. I am ten years old and having a hard time styling my nappy hair. My sisters give me barrettes and big rainbow color beads to make me look more pretty.

When we arrive my uncle and aunt want to know about my father, thankfully my mom leads with the lie. But my cousins teased me and my sisters for they knew, they all did, about my father and his condition.

“Where yo’ daddy at?” my older cousin asks us. The kids were told to go in the den to play or do whatever preteens do. My sisters were sitting around on their flip-phones, I was toying with my Tamagotchi I got for Christmas and my cousins were getting together Monopoly for us to play.

“I know he don’t be at work cz it’s the weekend,” my boy cousin says. I look over at my sisters sitting on the couch. They look at me with furrowed brows, meaning that I should keep my mouth shut.

“My momma said yo’ daddy in jail,” my other cousin says.

I hated them for it. They had fathers. They had happiness. Shyanne, my more rebellious sister was always quick to clap back. She saw them for what they lacked; I saw them for what I did.

According to my mother, he’s been playing a disappearing act since I was a baby. My father suffered from *the-black-man-syndrome* (among other things) and wanted an easy life with easy money, like every other black man. Being a family man just wasn’t his expertise, like every other black man. And I blamed him, still angry with him. I had resented him for leaving because I had not yet known that life be lifin’; the ugly and nastiness afforded to black men in American, I was not privy to.

I still have that sinking feeling whenever I mention money around him. And then, I’m 16 again and the bad memories, ones I’ve tried to forget, start to flood. I remember them like a dream...

Often when she arrives home from baby-sitting her mother's friends two boys who are 6 and 8 years old, she'd place money atop her black dresser. Her sisters want to go to the mall to meet up with their boyfriends. Despite her dispute, her mother forces her to go with them. She is the youngest and sick of being told what to do.

Before leaving she runs back upstairs to her room to grab some money to buy something from the food court. She has a room upstairs, next her mother's. After the Christmas break of her sophomore year, her father had been home from prison for three months, so she didn't mind leaving. She didn't like spending time with him anyway.

"I'm missin' \$10 have you seen it?" she asks her mother. Her jewelry box that she uses to hold expensive gold earrings she received from her grandmother and the little bit of change she earns from babysitting was empty. She has checked her oversized purse, jean pockets and zebra-print bookbag. She checks everything in her room from the dresser drawers to the top of ceiling fan. However, she never thinks that her father has stolen it.

"I haven't seen it," her mother yells from her bedroom. "But I will help you find it." Her mother says this in a whisper. Her mother joins her in her bedroom to help look for the coveted bill. The girl confronts her sisters, but they don't have it either. They have jobs at Regal Cinemas and Sonic, so she couldn't possibly understand why they would take a lousy ten bucks. She forgets about the money and decides to bum five bucks from her friends at the mall until she can pay them back. Once they arrive there, her sisters find their dates, and she meets her friends at the food court.

The next day her mother sternly tells her never to leave money out in order not to tempt her father and hands the girl a folded \$10 bill cuffed, as if not to let her father know.

That was the first and last time I left any money around my father. I didn't want to be another victim of his strange addiction.

To the Guy Who Called Me A Hippo in 9th Grade

i used to believe I hated you
you took without asking
worthless – you were
unkind to say the least,
you gave voice to my insecurities
laughed at my body drowned
in Doritos and my Mama's mac & cheese
baked under comments similar to amateur
night at the Apollo.
you were a dick always,
less than the dirt I began to grow in.

now I know I got over it never
only stood up under it
like a lotus birthed from mud
and flood I bloom by using
your words, I've needed them.
you should not receive my thanks
but I give it to
you don't take from me anymore.
it had to happen
for only the best rise from
concrete.

Section II: Self

Too Dark or Bastard Child

It was September of 2008, the first week of ninth grade. I wanted to do all the regular things fifteen-year-olds want to do like going to the mall and texting long messages to crushes all night. But I could never enjoy this normalcy. Most, or dare I say all, of my friends from middle school went to their zoned schools, so I would be going into high school friendless on the first day. My mother thought it best that my sisters and I go to a school 15 minutes away from our intended one for fear of bad influence. My sister, Shyanne, was a senior that year and Shanelle, a sophomore. I figured it would be fun or, at least comforting, to be going to school with family.

I was super short for my age and overweight weighing 250lbs., at age 15 and five foot two. It had gotten easier to wear my straight hair for I coveted compliments from people who found it “so long and pretty.” In eighth grade I began wearing my long hair in the front of my face in short-styled bangs or a side-part swoop. I thought I could hide from their eyes, from people’s hatred of my body and my own, from dealing with the reality of living without a father, and from my family’s constantly reminding me of my difference. The first day of school comes and goes as uneventfully as the others did. I am forced with removing myself from the entire day as much as possible.

“Hey, y’all,” some girl says to her sisters, not her, she’s sure. They walk into high school together for the first time. It is the weird twenty-minute-block before classes begin and all the students wanted to show off their back-to-school outfits. They are walking, aimlessly, past groups of teenagers huddled together catching up on experiences they’ve missed from the summer. Some of them are in the cafeteria throwing away their half-eaten breakfast, others are standing against lockers making plans to meet together for practice after school, still, others are sharing their paper schedules with best friends in hopes of having their classes in sync. The girl

who says hello knew her sisters from the previous year. She is brown skinned with soft but anxious eyes. Her accent reminds her of the all the hood chicks she's learned to hate.

"So, this y'all other sister?" the girl with the hood accent asks. She stares at her with inquisitiveness common to black girl's nature. Her sisters confirm her suspicion. Then she responds, "y'all got the same daddy?" Her sisters answer for her. She is surprised at the girl's boldness. Never had anyone assumed she was the bastard child of my fathers. But she knew what the girl saw on her that her sisters and close family members didn't, her color. Her sisters are both lighter skinned than she. They have a skin complexion likened to their parents. Her skin is brown and looks like she's bathed in brown sugar and cocoa butter.

Before that point, I hadn't questioned the events of my birth but, to say that I hadn't noticed my darker skin in comparison to my sisters, or my parents, would be a lie. They have always made me feel good about it. Calling my skin "clear" and "chocolate" and "good" whenever commercials on television or television episodes portrayed black women with my skin like mine. My sisters would make it seem like my brown flesh was much more desired.

"I wish I had skin like hers," Shyanne would say.

"Her skin is so pretty and smooth," Shanelle would chime in.

"Look, Nee. She has skin like yours. I wish my skin was like that," my mom would add. Statements like these by my mom and sisters would go on and on until I didn't feel insecure about it anymore. But somewhere in the deepest darkest part of my being I questioned if they actually meant it. Living with darker skin has always made life harder for anyone with it.

Earlier that year my sisters started wearing make-up and, naturally, I wanted to do it. Being the annoying little sister, I would ask for days and days for them to do my face like theirs.

"I can't, Nee. It won't look right on your skin," Shyanne responded.

“Yeah, these colors are too bright for you,” Shanelle said. I hadn’t thought it was a big deal to have hot pink lip gloss and green eyeshadow on my brown skin or that the kids at school would likely make fun of me for it. I just wanted to be like my sisters.

When the girl-with-the-hood-chick-accent asked about who my father might be, I overlooked the fact that she found blended families commonplace. I ignored the truth that she, too, may have siblings from different parents. I assumed she saw my brown skin as less than my sisters’ light skin. And what about my parents first thoughts of me? Did my father question my mother’s faithfulness? Did my mother think she was given the wrong baby after the drowsiness of her C-section ended? Did my father contemplate hating me because no one in his family was a dark as me?

I always knew my skin was too dark for anyone to believe I was a part of my family. Families of color tend to have this phenomenon of color blending more frequently than others. My grandparents on my mother’s side are both brown skinned and my grandparents on my father’s side have brown skin too. My mom’s three brothers share the darker hue, but her sister does not. My father’s only sister is as light skinned as he. If both sets of grandparents ever questioned how and why their children’s skin came to be so varied in complexion, I’m sure they’ve never shown it.

The late bell rings signaling I have five minutes to get to my first block class and lulls me out of my daydream. My sisters pull out their paper schedules and remind themselves of where their classes are. They begin walking in separate directions, Shanelle heading to the gym and Shyanne heading to the second floor for Chemistry. I am still standing by the first-floor social sciences wing gathering my thoughts after homegirl questioned my existence. Shyanne turns

around and punches me on my right arm and yells, “get to class, fresh meat!” Before taking the stairs to Chem.

Water Horse or Who You Talkin' To?

I always hated band camp. The heat, sweat, and crowds of sixteen-year-olds were never my forté. I hated jumping jacks and running in place. I hated figure eights and breathing exercises. But most of all, I hated the mile run. I could never run a full mile. My fifteen-year-old, relaxer-wearing, sweat-pant-rocking, bug-repellent-spraying self, could never run A MILE. I thought it was better, though, that I joined the marching band at my high school with my sister, Shanelle.

She was the typical black girl. The kind of home-girl-down-the-street who had a salty but sweet side like a candied cover almond. Shanelle was my middle sister but acted like the baby of the family. Her quick wit and slick mouth always kept her in trouble. My mother encouraged my sisters and I to stay close. I know her only regret is that she never had a son. She said so in the way she taught us to fight each other. She said so in the way she constantly told us to “man up” whenever problems would arise. She said so in the way she told us to avoid tears and kind words, the way she encouraged our independence, and the way she never asked anyone for help.

On the hottest day in August, the section leaders line us up two by two. It was the second week of band camp before any football games or competitions. The band members had already done warm up exercises including jumping jacks and pushups in the grass beside the band room doors. I swatted flies away while doing five of 10 pushups on my knees. The warm-up exercises always concluded with the mile run. I played flute since middle school but wasn't a pro by any means. My sister played clarinet so, naturally, we were casted off into separate ends of the woodwind section. Some way or another the flute section leader and the clarinet section leader, pair up my sister and I together. We were standing side by side, closer to the end the line right before the drumline and a few trumpet players. It was the mile run. The drum major blew the

whistle signaling us to begin the race. The lines start to move. I feel a familiar disgust rise and try to push the next ten minutes out of my thoughts. But before I can prepare mentally, I hear:

“Why I gotta be behind the hippo,” some guy with braces and part of the drum section blurts out.

“Who you talkin ’ to?” she hears her sister yell behind her.

“He talking ‘bout your sister!” the guy-from-the-drum-section’s partner says.

It doesn’t occur to the girl who or what the boy was talking about. She was the in-my-head type, thinking about how she was going to cheat the run today. Ever since band camp started, she couldn’t finish the run successfully, with the rest of the band members, to be certain. She always ended up finishing at the end no matter what position she was placed or how hard the drum major yelled at her to pick her feet up and finish strong.

I look over at my sister standing still and notice she is mean-mugging the name-calling guy behind us. My sister’s question wasn’t out of confusion; it was out of shock. Every black girl knows *those* words are fighting words. *Who you talkin ’ to* means: are you serious or check yourself or how dare you say that *to me*? As if we are above offense. The boy who spit those words at me knew it. And because the boy next to him knew it, too his response was set to incite the situation. Make fun of me in hopes of an argument or fight to happen. To add another story to: “One time in band camp...”

I’ve always been heavy. It’s like the fat demon runs in my family. Collard greens and corn bread stick to the bodies of the women in my family like chewing gum. Seasoning just taste better on baked mac and cheese and fried chicken. And we never just cook for one, even if that’s all we have. Invitations are sent out to co-workers, church members, next door neighbors, and kids who ride bikes in our driveways. Food is a way for us to communicate and gather, share

life's highs and lows, celebrate our accomplishments and forget our failures. However, diabetes and hypertension sway us like voodoo. I can count on two hands and feet how many family members have been taken by those diseases. So, when the boy with the brace-face said that to me, I figured I should just take it. It was not the first or worst thing someone called me, but it did confirm those dark thoughts I had about myself.

My mother was diagnosed with gestational diabetes when she was pregnant with my oldest sister. My boy cousin was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes when he was 16. My grandfather had his foot, then his entire leg, amputated due to diabetes. My grandmother takes insulin weekly because her body stopped producing enough. I always knew this made me different, though. But I never felt ugly because of it. Until the boy-who-called-me-a-hippo put voice to my difference and birthed insecurity.

Prom Night or Ugly Is

Last month I unblocked a man on Facebook who called me ugly. And as insignificant as the statement was, it tortured me for years. He didn't exactly come out and call me ugly, though. I was seventeen, 275lbs, and on my way to prom with a boy I met at my home church. The boy sent me a text message asking if I wanted to go with him. "I'll think about it," slowly turned into, "I don't really want to go," in a week's time. I wasn't comfortable in rejecting him and I wasn't someone to say "no," so I prolonged hurting his feelings.

He was kind, too kind, and not at all what I wanted in a boyfriend. I wasn't sure I even wanted a boyfriend, or why he even asked me out to prom with him. But we were somehow friends, really good friends. Going bowling, or to the movies, and grabbing froyo after school didn't seem as much pressure as prom. But prom was a big deal, one does not go to prom with just anyone, prom is reserved for couples, crushes, and best friends who couldn't find a date. The fact that he was a guy, a friend, and wanted to go to *prom* just didn't sit right with me.

"He asked you what," my mother responds after I told her what happened two weeks after I hurt my friend's feelings. We are riding around on a Saturday afternoon doing whatever mothers and daughters do on Saturday afternoons. My sisters are in the car with me, and I casually and regretfully let out that He asked me to prom.

"And you told him *no*," my mother cynically asks me. I didn't want to deal with being in the spotlight. I didn't like dressing up and certainly didn't like taking pictures. She stopped the car next to a 7eleven, turned around to look at me, and said, "text him and tell him you can go with him to prom." She made this statement with finality. My sister, Shanelle, backed up my mother's resolution with, "yeah, he prolly don't wanna go with you no more, anyway." And Shyanne chimes in, "you prolly hurt his feelings, Nee." They both shook their heads as I

explained why I didn't want to go. Apparently, my reason isn't good enough for they both agree I was foolish to let him down.

While I am texting him back explaining how sorry I am, my mother is calling his mother. That was the problem with going to prom with someone you meet at church. Everyone knew everyone, consequently, everyone knew your business. And that was the way it was for the next three months of my life. Everyone at my church would discuss my prom day as if they were going too, as if they knew for sure that we would end up together, some even started naming our unborn children. I hated it. I hated going. I hated staying longer so that my mother could tell everyone what I'd done. I hated that everyone knew. I hated talking to nosey church folk about it. I hated my mother for making me go. And I hated myself for agreeing to go with him. I hated that my strength wasn't in my *no* but in my mother's *yes*. I hated that decisions were made for me but without me.

The night comes. The sun is shining so as to make the clouds forget they are needed. It is too beautiful, too perfect. I force a smile on my face to hide my attitude about the entire evening. Shanelle is going to prom the same night at our high school. I figured it is a good thing that I'm not going to prom with her, instead I was going to prom at my date's school, thirty minutes from my house, and that is okay for me. We are getting dressed together, sharing spray-on body shimmer and sticky lip gloss from Shyanne's make-up bag. My mother is taking pictures of it all.

My date pulls up in a cream-colored Chrysler 3000 that belonged to his aunt. His mother drives because he hasn't passed his driving permit test after three tries. His suit is black, and his vest is navy blue. Blue *is* the color of my dress, turquoise to be exact. I'm not upset that he got the color wrong, but it did throw off the collectiveness of our pictures. Despite my short frame and stubby thickness, I feel pretty in the dress. It is long with halter-top straps. The back is low

cut and the bottom flows out like a ball gown but without all the fluffiness. My mother chose to splurge on my sister's prom dress because it is her senior year, and last-minute-prom-date-shopping does not fit into her budget. But she told me it would work out. She told me no one would know that she bought my dress from Maxway and only spent \$25. I feel bad for making her have to do that, but she tells me not to worry, after all she did force me to go.

We take pictures for an hour with my sister, my mother, my oldest sister; then my sister and her date, me and my "date," both moms, and finally we leave. I am overwhelmed to say the least, but I figure the worst of it is over. My mom had something nice to put on her Facebook page and, really, that's all she wanted.

We drive back to his grandparents' house, who happened to be the pastor and co-pastor at my home church. It was a quaint one story home that always smelt like moth balls and fried chicken. That night it is an unusual number of cars in the driveway. I have no idea we were making a pit stop before the prom, but I don't complain. I hope we don't have to take more pictures, though. I feel beautiful and my date didn't miss a chance to remind me. He constantly mentions the shimmer on my neck, something my sister said I needed. I hated dressing up, but my sister seemed to feel natural in gowns in heels.

We both walk in the house side by side greeting everyone there. His mother joins his father at the living room sofa. His aunt whose car he borrowed stands with his uncle at the entrance to the kitchen. His other uncle is already there sitting on a leather armchair and his aunt is sitting next to his grandfather on a corner sofa next to the television. Everyone is happy to see us and makes sure they complement us on how nice we look together. My date's mother hands me a boutonniere and tells me to pin it to his suit.

“I don’t know how to do this,” I say honestly, I try twice with no avail. Frustrated, I try again and the pin slips around the stem of the flower and sticks behind the fabric of his suit pocket, hiding the tip. Everyone smiles and his father snaps a few pictures of us during his ordeal. Before I can find some relief in the bathroom or back outside where I can be alone and away from people’s camera phones. I faintly hear: “Can I take a picture of you?” his uncle asks. I wasn’t expecting to see him or his wife there.

“Yeah,” I respond, uneasily. I am sick of everyone asking me to take my picture. I don’t even like looking at myself in the mirror. After three seconds I smile a fake smile, and one bad photo on his camera phone, he lets me see it.

“That’s ugly,” I jerked my head up and scrunched my face into a ball signaling my disgust.

“Well, you know that’s not the camera person’s fault. It’s the person in the picture,” he says snickering. I agree and shrug it off as just another slick comment. Finally, someone agrees with what I have been telling myself all night. Deep down I know everyone is just being nice to me. No one has called me “beautiful, or “pretty” or “nice” so much in one night. No one has gone out of their way to take pictures of me, the girl who would rather read sci-fi fantasy books and eat honey buns, the daughter my father stopped writing sweet letters too, the friend who never got asked out on dates by the boys at school, the sister who would tell on her sisters for sneaking out of the house with their boyfriends, the girl who desperately wanted everyone to see her for who believed she was – ugly.

The evening continued uneventfully. My date was sweet to me, asked me three times to be his girlfriend, and kissed my hand before saying good night. He wasn’t pushy, he held doors and pulled out chairs at the hotel the prom was held, and awkwardly danced with me at the after-

prom-party to make me laugh. He made me feel like I was the only girl in the world. But I didn't like it. I didn't want to be his girlfriend. I didn't even want to be there with him. I probably could've been a better date to him. I mean, he did (or his parents) put a lot of money into this one night. But, to me, the idea of letting him date me was letting him have control, and strong women don't do that. The thought of him liking was too foreign and strange enough for me to run from. The entire night I wished he would just stop calling me cute.

How to Tell Your Black Mother You Cut Your Hair

1. Don't

The past has taught you that actions speak louder than words. When you meet her for dinner on your 20th birthday, let her see the tiny finger coils spiraled all over your head for herself. When your sisters make ugly comments about how much they hate it, shrug and ignore. When your mother is silent and chooses not to acknowledge your change, accept the silence as a welcome guest.

2. Smile when she touches it.

She doesn't know it makes you feel less than. Your sisters' hair was always so much more prettier anyway. She does not know that natural hair has superpowers that far surpasses its nemesis. When she says, "I wasn't expecting it to be so soft," let her know you've been taking care of your hair with products that make it thrive, once you're over your initial frustration.

3. Tell her it will grow back.

Despite black people's hair being the most hated for its length, tell her it does grow but... shrinkage. It isn't the worst thing but, for your mom, it will be like waiting for snow to melt in January. You know from your hairstylist that natural hair needs to be cared for in ways straight was never meant for. You will cuddle it with shea butters, argan and tea tree oils to make the moisture last. The last thing you want for your coils to be is dry. You will use egg yolk, raw honey, and coconut oil to deep condition it. This process takes more time, but you are used to good things taking a while to come to you.

Watching YouTube videos or naturalistas explaining what products to use and not to use, turn you into a product junky. So, you avoid mirrors for the first six months, forcing you and those who hate your new short curls to love it. And you do fall in love with your hair, no matter

how hard it is to see you as who you were born to be. After five years you see the length you desire and accept those first sixth months as part of your process.

4. Make light of the situation.

Like the rest of the black community, laughing and joking about serious moments are how we cope. Tell your mother it'll be just like gambling, one day, you'll know you've got a sure fire, bomb twist out and other days, you'll consider wearing wigs for weeks until it grows longer.

You find early on that natural hair dries out in the bitter winter months and in the hot summer ones, so you resolve to protective styles to combat dry ends. Box braids, faux locs, and Marly twists are styles you repeatedly wear for months at a time. You don't ever want to go back to using heat on your hair, so you abandon all of your blow dryers, flat irons and hot curlers for aloe vera plants and Shea Moisture products instead. This will be your introduction. You will follow your wash day routine religiously, refusing to skip a day for nothing and no one. Afterall, you don't want your cotton-plush curls to fall out.

5. Tell her because you wanted to, when she asks why.

Be prepared for a backhand or a quick neck roll as black children don't speak to their black parents like that. Then, explain to her that this is your hair, your property, your life, and you must own it.

6. Accept her hatred.

Your mother will hate your hair and you will mistake it as hatred of you. This will last for two years until you realize that it's not you. Your mother has made up in her mind that your "long, straight hair" was developed because of her. She will tell you over and over: "I had your hair long and pretty and then you go and cut it." You do your best to explain to her why: that you always hated your straight hair, that you used it as means to hide, that it never did anything

for your self-esteem but make you feel less than without it. You try to explain to her the bone straight hair that she helped develop, was what she saw as beautiful, not you. You try to explain to her that cutting it was a way for you to make your own decisions, a way for you to own something. When she has stopped listening to your reasoning, you agree to disagree. You know your mother will never understand.

Thoughts while visiting her father in maximum-security prison

she wonders if her mother's tears are true,
they come and swell at the crease as if
they've forgotten how to release.

she wonders if the smell of stale coffee and burnt popcorn
will ever leave her clothes – she's stripped and redressed
three times to win entry.

there are too many stipulations:
skirts and shorts have different agendas
crop tops and sandals find residence in overcrowded closets
and she's found solace in turtlenecks.

she wonders if her father will notice her hair
or pretend it isn't there like the last five years of existence
and decide to start all over.
new conversations of work and school replace
talk of top ramen and antenna TV
mimicking the fresh follicles growing from her scalp.

she wonders if her sisters are uncomfortable
sitting close to felons and coons
they've been told to avoid.
she knows they're sick of the
process meddling in their lives.

she wonders if the baby crying next to her will ever shut up,
or maybe she welcomes the normal sound
amid the guard scuffling behind her.
he has asked for her gum to be removed
as if she'd smuggled particles of contraband
between her saliva

she wonders if her father's love for her is equivalent to his
proximity - distant.
or is it made up like the faces her family puts on to see him.
she's never heard him say *i love you*
during thirteen years of knowing him as father

she wonders if this'll ever change:
visiting, repenting, handcuffing, bearing, lying, apologizing
REPEAT.

Her childhood – a father daughter dance he always missed.

What Forgetting It Does *or* Some Kindness

I made an honest effort to forget. It is my graduation day, and nothing could ruin it. Senior Prom with a few of my close friends had been everything I wished. The senior trip to Busch Gardens with my classmates was fun enough to make it to my memory archive of pictures on Facebook. By the time June 2012 is here I am excited to put a bookmark in this chapter but not excited enough to open the next.

Convincing my father to attend my graduation was like drawing circles in sand, one minute it's there and the next it's gone. He happened to be around for that special occasion but felt out of place, among other things, being present in my life. My mother drugged him, so I found out after I walked across the stage in front of the graduating class of 2012. It didn't matter if he was there or not because I knew what to expect. I knew he couldn't possibly care enough about me to show some kindness.

Three weeks later, I am well into my summer vacation, not knowing how long the vacation feeling will last, hoping it will stay longer. I have no real prospects for college. I was rejected from my first pick, James Madison University, and I was too sunken to even apply to my second choice. My mother tells me to pray for an open door as if I have other options that don't include going to Tidewater Community College for two years. My father has made his way back to prison after six months of being home. My family is unmoved by his absence and in a way, I am happy he is gone. Things feel more normal when he is away. My mom has built up a tolerance for avoiding the obvious and thus, my sisters and I have fallen into ignoring the truth as well. Today I find it hard to get out of bed. I have no job and no real plans for my young future. My father comes and goes as if he's a circus clown. My mother pressures me for a clear plan. My sisters throw their suggestions at me for work and school like they all know what's best for

me. My hair is breaking at the ends thanks to a new brand of box relaxer I am using, I find more dark eyeshadow to play with, my eating habits include finishing a full box Oreos as a hobby. But nothing takes the hurt away.

She finally gets out of bed only to find her favorite pair of jeans is dirty from wearing them all week. Her bedroom is loud with bright yellow painted walls and a soft brown dresser and matching nightstand. The wide windows mounting two of her bedroom walls are shining in more afternoon light than she wants. What she wants is an ending. She descends from the stairs to her mother's kitchen. It is unusually silent for 4pm on a Thursday afternoon. Shyanne is off from work at Forever 21 and Shanelle has another month until she heads back to Virginia State University. Her mother is sitting in the living room watching her soaps on her day off.

She thinks it best if she is not there anymore. She thinks how easy it would be to not have the feelings of shame, abandonment, insecurity and failure. She knows that those labels are what her loved ones see when they see her. She thinks of how happy her family will be without her. She knows they won't miss her being a burden. She wonders how easy it would be to stop feeling. She thinks how easier it would be to forget.

After she steps foot on the hardwood floors that connect the stairs to the landing, she creeps past her mom seated on the couch and heads for the kitchen. Her movements are methodical. Everything in the kitchen is exactly as it is, always. She opens the kitchen drawer where the large cutting knives are kept, only to be taken out for Thanksgiving and Christmas. The shiniest one catches her attention first. It is thick and heavy, a lot like her. She thinks the knife and her body have much in common. Only thick and heavy things can bring pain. Its sparkles are seen underneath the dullness of the rest. She pushes to the sides the knives that will not cut deep and grabs the one she knows will do the job. The job, she thinks, the plan, she

wonders, is to place the knife on her dark flesh. So. She does. The coolness of the knife doesn't stop her. She places it on the right side of her neck first. She presses it deeper into her skin, hoping it will not take long. Nothing is felt. No one comes to see what she is doing. No one cares what happens.

She stands with her head tilted toward the ceiling, while holding the knife against her neck in her left hand. Her right hand is gripping the marble on the edge of the kitchen counter, and her body is languid. She knows that the slightest breeze would cause her to collapse. Her left hand tightens around the wooden grip of the knife and the tip breaks skin causing a small stream of blood to seep down her neck and onto her t-shirt.

She closes her eyes to welcome what is to come.

"Nee Nee!" I hear my mother yelling for me. I open my eyes to realize the fullness of what I am about to do. I turn my head down to see my arm across my body and the knife pressed against my skin.

"Nee!" my mom calls again. I plant my feet a bit more firm on the white kitchen floor and release my hand from the knife's grip. It drops to the ground beside my bare feet, missing my toes and heel.

"Yeah, ma," I hear myself respond, surprised to hear my voice. It is strong and shows no signs of what almost occurred seconds ago. I removed my hand from the kitchen counter and bend down to pick the knife up off the floor. I rush to the sink to clean the knife before anyone sees and place it back inside the open drawer.

"Can you bring me the 'mote,'" my mother says. I clean up the blood stains coming from my neck using a damp paper towel and wipe up, as best I can, the stains from my raggedy t-shirt.

“Here I come,” I yell back. I am not annoyed by her simple request nor am I angry. I know fully that she is able to get the remote control that is only two steps from the couch she is sitting on for herself. However, the thought of someone needing me made the idea of taking my own life less attractive.

The following Monday I get a call from a student ambassador from Virginia Wesleyan College confirming my acceptance into the institution. He tells me that there is room for me. The student before me could no longer attend for whatever reason and I was next on the list. And yet, the thought of a college wanting me, no matter how mediocre my SAT scores are, or how amateur my grades seem, or how much money I don’t have to pay it; made life feel better.

The Strength of Black Women

may be immeasurable.
Always honored -
more revered than despised.
They make it look easy –
ever thirsty for other people's problems and pain.
Maybe a superpower, the way they perform
Under pressure.

I often wonder if my mother experiences
the weight of wanting to be strong.
It always seemed like she was forced to pick up
other people's ugly
and flaunt it like cheap makeup.
I cannot remember her breaking:
not when my father left
or when she had to work five jobs
and after my sisters left home.

She always made it look effortless:
composing herself against
the odds and society's oppression.
Being both black and woman
made for an extra layer of hate,
but no one would know it -
that she experienced such repulsion
from everyone for having three kids
a jailbird for a husband
and being on welfare.

I wish I knew how she did it
and that she did not expect such
heroic strength from me.
I would like to be her – how she
numbs herself when hurting
and banishes the tears.
But I know I am not that *kind* of strong.

My strong isn't always
noisy or aggressive. It is optimistic
and expressive, refuses to hold onto any
nasty thinking; is often forgiving but
uncompromising. My strong says no
to people pleasing conformity, but feels and accepts
the baggage of others as testament to growth

and not a special badge.

My strong may look like surrender –
being okay without control
or vying for first place,
surrendering to love and letting relief reign.

Stubborn Stutter or Desperate Times

I inherited a stubborn stutter from my father. And to say that it eventually went away, as I hoped and prayed for, would be false. Though it stays, it doesn't bother me. Well not too much. Its presence seems to be most present when I'm nervous or happy or upset. So, that is to say, all the time.

"Why don't you talk much," my sister asked me after I refused to say the Lord's prayer in Sunday school. My mother chose to bury the hope of Jesus deep in I and my sisters' hearts for that seemed to help her make it through tough times. So, she thought her faith would be the same life jacket to us as it was for her.

"Because I don't wanna talk in front of all them people," I told her in a whisper. Shyanne's frustration at my refusal turned into genuine concern. She knew that I knew how to say it because I had been practicing verses in Matthew all week. Three weeks ago, I began sixth grade with a nasty attitude, a new hairstyle, and big hoop earrings to match my widening waist. I probably knew more written in books than I knew about my classmates in school or what color of beads to wear to signal to the boys in school what risks I was willing to take.

Everyone was required to say the Lord's prayer that Sunday and I was not having it. I was only shy when I didn't want to be, which did nothing for me in the moment. I knew my secret would come out in public. It was like I could feel the beginning letters of words failing to form completely on my tongue. In my head, I practiced pushing the words together quickly so that no one would notice my difference. And then I tried slowing them down so that every syllable could be pronounced thoroughly but they both sounded silly. So, no, I was not about to get up there in front of the church and have them laugh at me. I confessed to my sister why I didn't want to do the stupid test. I mean, what did it matter if I knew the Lord's Prayer or not.

“She don’t talk a lot because she stutter,” Shyanne told my Sunday school teacher after she tried with no avail to get me to recite the prayer. Shyanne was frustrated with me then turned her frustration to our teacher for making me do it.

“Oh, I didn’t know that,” my Sunday school teacher said in a calm, sweet voice. She looked at my sister with care in her eyes. We were in the makeshift classroom in the back of my home church. Other Sunday school students had already begun to recite the prayer with ease. But as much as I wanted to show them that I could do it better, I couldn’t bear to hear what my teacher had to say. So, I walked as fast as I could to the bathroom and stayed there until, or I felt like, the class was over.

In high school when all my friends were getting jobs, I didn’t want to. The thought of any job involving customer service or retail made my skin sweat. I resolved to earning good grades in school and doing small babysitting jobs to curb my new shoe fetish. Communicating with actual people, talking to customers about their day, convincing old people a worthless piece of clothing was worth their last social security check just didn’t seem like a good fit for me. I wasn’t ready for the ridicule or humiliation.

I dodged the stutter demon until I got to college. I applied for a work study position as an assistant to a beautiful soul. I learned through social media and asking around that the person interviewing me was a black woman and that brought comfort to my soul. At a small liberal arts school, there weren’t many black professors, students, or deans. On any given day, I saw 20 percent of the minority students and staff in the café, not in classrooms or school events. My feelings of comfort didn’t last for long because I knew I had to speak to her.

It is the day of my interview. I calm myself as much as I can. I have only done practice runs of how to articulate s-words and hard consonant sounds in the mirror. But being able to

perform in front of someone else, not knowing what words were going to spill out of my mouth was something totally different.

As I walk through the doors of the Communications and Alumni Affairs office, I am directed to sit down in the second floor waiting area. No amount of coaching can prepare me for the questions that may arise, no matter how many times I goggled searched: *top 5 interview questions*. The waiting room is decorated with pictures of former and present Wesleyan students posing in various activities around campus. None of them look like me. A fact I am learning to accept at VWC. Suffering from stuttering and a mild form of analysis paralysis lead me to think: What if I'm too early? What if I'm too late? What if I wore the wrong color nail polish? Am I smiling too much? I hope she doesn't ask me anything about my studies. Maybe she won't ask me anything at all. But is that even a good thing?

The interview begins with as much banality as the rest of my day.

"Tell me why you would be a good candidate for this position?" my soon-to-be-boss asks me. She finally calls me into her personal office and sits me down in front her desk that has Norfolk State University and Alpha Kappa Alpha plaques placed across the front.

"I am well organized, a team player, very punctual, and I pay attention to details," I say proudly. I make sure to make eye contact with her and choose my words wisely. Thankfully, her question was one of the most frequented on my google search. After the first question she asks me more about myself, my studies, and my future, and why she should be sure if I would be a good fit. She wants to show me around the office next, something I agree to but am skeptical of because this is not something I can control.

“This is the filing room. You’ll spend most of your time here or in the big conference room preparing mailings for the office,” she tells me. We walk through the entire scope of the upstairs offices.

“Do you have any questions so far?” she asks. She straightens her bright pink glasses on the sides of face and clasps her deep brown hands together in front of her.

“Um, n- well, I was wondering. W-ill I be working ca-lose with anyone else?” I ask in a staccato.

“No, you’ll mostly have independent work to do and if not, I will not have you come in. But I will still put in your time.”

I smile faintly. I didn’t have to work with anyone I didn’t know, and I didn’t have to speak much. And she was, basically, giving me free money. A typical day looked like filing new donor letters, preparing mailers and cutting and pasting papers to the sign in sheet. I worked alone and didn’t mind the silence.

Section III: Seen

Nappy

dirty word
 holding me hostage
 to my secret and private predilections –

yes, my hair is
 nappy and knotted from root to tip. i'm
 rooted in my ancestors' ancient customs of being wild
 so excuse me

if I don't wait for you to tip-toe around the subject. its tipped over into popular culture –
 The Afro
 the beloved of every naturalista's hairstyles
 it's liberating.

The kink and twist of each and every coil and curl stitched into my hair follicles are ropes and
 vines of African jungles.
 I wondered if my relaxed hair got so many looks and eye boggles.
 and people are startled when they see me at 17 - my hair?

straight, long, and "beautiful"
 they ask me the common question: "so, why'd you go natural?"
 as if it's the plague
 you see, just because the movement has spread like wildfire

doesn't mean we'll accept your disdain.
 and for every black girl whose magic has been stolen by harsh words or bitter conclusions
 remember your crown is only a statement of who you are inside don't hide
 beneath it.

The Transition or Why I Did It

For as long as I can remember, my hair has felt like something I should be at war with. Like a piece of me that never wanted to cooperate. A silent, tragic part of me that needed to be tamed and deserved to be mistreated. Culture has taught me the dangers of touching it in its natural form. As if I'd get pricked by the unruly ends. As if my life hadn't been wild enough. Applying relaxer to it or covering it with braids seemed like the only logical hairstyles to tame it.

There was a nine-month gap in between knowing I wanted to change my hair and actually changing it. The transition began in the fall of 2014 before my mother started hiding all the kitchen products for fear of me using them in my hair. I had done my research on natural hair or what little there was and found that household items, mainly kitchen items, work best for black women's hair. I traded creamy-crack for coconut oil and shea butter.

"Nee, make sure you label what is yours!" my mom yells to me one morning. I have left the apple cider vinegar in the shower caddy of my childhood home. It is fall break at Virginia Wesleyan College and even though I commute to class everyday, I spend most of my nights at my friends' dorm rooms, sleeping on raggedy couches and sharing their twin sized beds. The bathrooms, though, had been filled with natural hair care products. Products we'd made ourselves.

"Okay, ma. I'll just buy you some more," I yell back. She always gets frustrated with me on small things and, since I would be going back to school soon, I figured how I kept my home space shouldn't matter much.

My friend, Kenya, was the only one in my group of friends who had natural hair before attending Wesleyan, which needed to be cared for daily. My other friend had transitioned to locks by that time. We are sophomores this year and we share a routine of wash days and twist

outs. Three of my friends shared an apartment on campus and my other friend had a single bedroom in another part of campus. I have natural products sprawled across every bathroom of my friends and they didn't mind sharing theirs either. My mother would never approve of me using perishable items in my hair.

"You know I use that in my food right," my mom continues berating me. *She never lets up.* She's now pointed her attention to the half-used carton of coconut oil I mixed with olive oil and tea tree essential oils last night.

"Yes, but it's good for my hair, too."

"Well, you need to replace all my stuff you been using. I don't know why you wanna run around with your hair looking all nappy," my mom says. I had just decided to transition my hair two weeks ago, without telling her. I am 19 years old and still did not have a say so about what I do or how I look. I wanted to live on campus again this year, but it was heart-breakingly cheaper to commute the 35 minutes from Portsmouth to VA Beach. My mom was fine with the idea; however, I think she found it easier to control my life from home than at college. Shyanne lives on her own in a small apartment in Chesapeake and Shanelle lives on campus at Virginia State. But my mother does not seem to be as concerned with their looks or behavior as she is with me. Being the youngest child of my mother's always meant she knew best for me regardless of my own wishes. Transitioning my hair seemed like a delicate act of rebellion.

I began the process of training my relaxed tresses by cutting out all heat and stopping my use of relaxers, colors and dyes. I come home with my hair in huge goddess braids or twisted and tucked beneath baseball caps and hair ties for the last two weeks. My mother didn't approve.

"Why do you keep covering up your beautiful hair?" my mother asked after seeing me wear a baseball cap every day last week.

“Uh, I’m, uh... I’m going natural,” I was hoping she wouldn’t notice and that I would not have to explain myself or my reasoning because I knew how she felt. I also hoped she would not know what “going natural” actually meant. I knew how much she paid hair stylists like Ms. Jennifer, to make my hair “pretty,” I knew how she reveled in knowing her daughters had long, thick hair that looked like a white woman’s mane. I knew how much she didn’t like to see my new growth whenever I waited too long to get a relaxer. And I knew she knew I stuttered when I was lying.

“And what does that mean, Shanisha?” my mom asked. I knew she was angry because black mothers only use first names when they’re serious. So, I explain to her what going natural means, “when a black woman chooses to wear her natural hair, like the nappy hair as you call it. But they’re really just tight curls that have been curled around themselves for lack of proper care,” I fumble over which words to use to best explain myself.

“So, you saying you don’t like the pretty, straight hair I worked so hard to give you and your sisters?” my mom cut me off. I’ve always wanted to make my mother happy. I didn’t want to cause her any more stress than she was already dealing with or have her think I am ungrateful for the time and money she sacrificed to care for my hair. I made good grades in school, I didn’t sneak out of the house at night when all my friends were, I got a babysitting job in high school to help her pay the bills, and I made sure I never made her cry.

“No, well, yes. I guess I’m saying that natural hair can be pretty, too,” I responded.

“Whatever, Nee. You’re grown now and you can do whatever you want with your life but, I do not like natural hair.” And that was the last she’s said about it. Whenever I think we’ve come to a compromise on it, she reiterates those same words. And I remain silent. But I wonder

what her mother taught her about black hair. Why she's grown to dislike it so much? Why she thinks straight hair is so much better than natural?

After I finish labeling the apple cider vinegar and coconut oil with white paper that says, "for hair" I pack up a week's worth of clean clothes, some snow boots and my satin bonnet, zip up my peacoat, kiss my mother bye, and head out of the front door, almost knocking over the lilacs on the porch.

I big chopped on my 20th birthday.

Ode to The Afro

you're most envied for your locs,
 drenched in oils of Moroccan descent,
 drained of dread and doom.
 from years of darkness and discontent
 fashioned from cornrows and broken ends.
 you make light blush away blinks
 curated in culture from a million afro picks
 out of originality and half truths

you are water's refuge,
 soaked in curls once seen as dangerous
 blotted out of history.
 told you were uncivilized
 in need of creamy crack to tame your mane.
 you are alive in conditioned coils
 from castor sediments.
 a wonder you survived the drought of affirmation.

you breathe in appropriation
 and breathe out anomaly.
 rooted in traditions of ancient
 african tribes – cursed by shrinkage
 and cold weather.
 you call volume home
 and don't welcome conventions.
 you make the straighten tresses hide

you grace the best –
Angela, Diana, Toni, Maya
 and distinguish the better.
 you elongate to unforgettable length
 yours is a special place for creative daughters
 and wokeness birthed from
 label-namers and couth-breakers
 you became beautiful when black was born.

The Audacity or Big Chop

The room was pure white save for a black stylist's chair coupled with a vanity mirror. The renovated garage turned hair studio left me skeptical at first. Her inviting smile and laid-back demeanor eased my nerves. She was in her mid 30s, average height, light-skinned with an afro that made any naturalista jealous. The studio smelled of mango body butter, eucalyptus mint, lemon juice and tea tree oil. She wore a long ethereal dress down to her knees. It was bright yellow and made from lace and mesh. But I couldn't take my eyes off her hair. It was red, regal and rebellious. She had it puffed out to its full length like the ladies in the 70s who donned afros as a sign of liberation. I envied her hair.

When I sat down in her stylist chair, she had me answer a questionnaire regarding everything from where I live and work to why I chose to big chop in the first place. My hostess was compiling a list of statements from naturalistas as to why they "go natural." While she questioned me, my friends, Gabrielle and Marissa, sat on bean bag chairs and flicked between BET and VH1 on her flat screen television. An important event in life of any kind calls for close friends to be there to share it. Gabrielle was the first to "go natural," making the leap in high school way before the natural hair movement was rebirthed. I was next. And Marissa promised she would never go natural, but in later years she took the leap too.

My hair stylist, Kesha, previewed her homemade products and the benefits of using them. She gave us samples and promised to use some in my hair when she styled it. One was a thick creamy substance, vanilla in color and almost pasty used for both leave-in conditioner and co-wash treatments. They smelled of mint leaves, which was something I never thought to use in my hair. She explained it had wonderful benefits for my very sensitive scalp. I only purchased a two ounce container because she was mostly out of stock of the rest. Her boyfriend walked in

unexpectedly and greeted her and her guests. He looked at her hair with admiration and desire with which she acknowledged, “where else can I walk around with my hair looking like this?” He kissed her and left her to her client.

Kesha didn’t start washing and styling my hair until about 45 minutes into my visit. She made sure it was still damp before cutting it. She started by trimming the ends then cutting the straight pieces evenly all the while keeping up a conversation about friends, jobs and hair, of course. Kesha was from the west coast, the bay area to be exact. She moved to Hampton, Va with her military boyfriend eight months prior to my visit. I found out about her via an online article from *Black Girls Rock*. She had the best reviews for customer service, styling, and ambiance. Piece by piece, strand by strand the past 20 years of life fell to the floor. I only remember hearing the blade of scissors slide past each other. When she finished, she swept up the pieces of straight hair and placed them in a baggie for me as a keepsake. She said some ladies like to hold on to their relaxed ends as a reminder. I’m not sure of what, though. I loved my relaxed hair but I hated what it did to my scalp. During my transitioning months, my scalp would scab and sometimes bleed because my hair was not used to two different types of hair growing from it. I knew natural would be healthier for me, I just wanted it to hurry up and grow. I envisioned long, full curls. But I got short, tighter, firm curls instead.

I wanted a specific style called a tapered cut, which is a style that is long up top and a little shorter around the edges and back. After she cut out all the straight ends, she styled my hair by forming small finger coils. Finger coils or comb coils are curls formed by twisting small pieces of hair together repeatedly from root to tip with your thumb and index finger or using a small comb. It looks similar to dreadlocks. I squeezed the straight hair airtight in the baggie

knowing my decision was final. I didn't look at a mirror until the process was over. I didn't cry, I didn't laugh, I didn't get upset. I only stared back at the person looking at me in the mirror.

The Relaxer or Push Back

The summer after I got rid of the ruin, I begin making plans to study abroad. I majored in French and a requirement of every French major was to study abroad in France or a Francophone country. My sophomore year, despite my protest and nerves, I won a scholarship to study in the south of France an entire semester for free. It seemed like the stars were aligning for me, but I was completely terrified of facing this new place with new hair, alone.

It was a series of first for me: first time on an airplane, first time out of the country, first time being away from family and friends, first time adjusting to a new hairstyle without proper care, the first time I would have to face my stutter demon in a new language, the first time I would experience othering intimately.

It is March of 2015 in a quiet Marseille airport terminal. Spring break freed me from my current studies in the south of France. The unexpected layover in Marseille before Brussels, gave me and my ever-curious, pale-skinned friend time. And, naturally, conversation was welcomed. My *friend* and I, whom I met two months prior, talk for two hours over café au lait and chamomile téa. She is blonde with blue eyes to match and I have never felt more unsettled since we've met.

"I didn't know black people's hair wasn't naturally straight," my friend says. She has leaked to me that she is from Washington D.C, born in Chicago, but moved to China when her father got stationed there for his job. I can't recall exactly what he does, but it is nothing I knew any black man back at home to do for a living.

"Really?" is all I can say. I couldn't bring myself to actually believe it was true. She tells me about her *black* friend back at home in Chicago who never wears her real hair. She is

from more affluent neighborhoods than me, speaks better French than me (English, too), and goes to a better, more expensive college than me.

“How did you not know?” I keep pressing. I’m sure our sudden friendship reminds her of her friend with the relaxed hair. But mine isn’t anything like it.

“There aren’t that many black kids in the neighborhood I’m from,” She responds quietly as if she’s trying not to offend me. She met her relaxed-haired friend at her private high school, and they became inseparable since. So, to think that her best friend, who shared everything with her, but her hair styling secrets, was betraying.

“How’d you find out her hair wasn’t straight?” I ask, trying my best to be nosey. The image of me, a nappy-headed black girl from the ghettos of Portsmouth, talking to a white girl with long, blonde curly hair from suburbs of D.C in an airport in the south of France is troubling to the say the least. The ideal of her perfect hair and her perfect frame was what I’ve learned to despise. I had not known her to prove her trust to me yet so everything about me wanted to keep her at arm’s length.

“Well, she never wore her natural hair. And then one of my other friends told me black people’s hair isn’t always straight like that,” She responds. I can tell by her face that she was remembering that exact moment, like her heart broke to learn that information from someone else. I only respond with laughter to hide my disbelief.

I transitioned my hair for nine months before actually deciding to cut the relaxed hair off. In the world of black hair, the big chop – the cutting of relaxed or heat damaged hair in order to let hair grow in its natural state – is the height of liberation. It’s kind of a big deal for us natural girls because it forces us into everything new. It stripped me of the “beautiful” straight hair I’ve been taught to love and was better than hair naturally growing from my scalp.

“Why’re you laughing?” She asks me. She scrunches her face up in a ball to signal her frustration as if she’s the one who should be offended by her ignorance.

“Nothing. I mean, when I think about all the products I have to use to make my natural hair look healthy, and all the years I went hating it, it just seems funny to me that you don’t know black girls’ hair ain’t always bone straight,” and with that, she concedes.

I’ve never had this kind of conversation with a white girl before and most times, when I do let white people know how passionate I am about my hair, they misunderstand me passion for anger. But this, she had to know that it wasn’t true.

Even she experienced the same type of ignorance and othering her used-to-be-bff-relaxed-hair-wearing friend did. While living in China with her family she let out that a few natives would take pictures with her because they had never seen a white girl with blonde hair and blue eyes. We were at a local bakery in Aix-en-Provence during a break in between classes.

We both majored in French Studies and shared almost the same five classes together. Our breaks were the same and, subsequently, we frequented the same bakeries for lunch. Again, seeing an image of us two together in a bakery on Cours Mirabeau is disturbing. The opportunity to study abroad in Aix-en-Provence wasn’t given to me by chance or reason but pure hard work. I gained a scholarship called Global Scholar that I had to interview for twice and write three essays explaining why I wanted to study abroad and why I *deserved* the amount of money it required to do so. She got to study in Aix via her father’s generosity. Her father felt it was better for her to study in France than in Italy because she knew the French language better.

“Are you serious?” I asked, while eating my pain au chocolat. I have heard the stigma, but I never believed it was true.

Being surprised was a normal occurrence in the four months I spent abroad. The students I met were all white, the French people I saw on a day-to-day basis were white, and my roommate was, too. If it wasn't for all of us attending the Institute for American Universities or (l'IAU) I would have never crossed paths with the majority of the people I met there. They were all from the United States, just clomped together in their comfortable circles of friendship. And that's how we liked it. But the culture shock wasn't as bad as the constant questioning.

Battle Scars or Lessons on Comfort

My doctor told me the disease was chronic, that it had no cure, and its origin unknown. I remember it like a dream.

“Let’s see underneath your arms,” Dr. Thornton asks her. She lifts her right arm high to reveal the boils growing from her skin. Lesions of scars have begun to form and peak through the hairs on top of her arm pit. She winces at the familiar pain of raising her hand, a normalcy she hasn’t enjoyed around others in many years. The odor keeps her inside herself and embarrassed at what others, even her family, might think.

“Does it cause you discomfort?” Dr. Thornton asks. He is wearing a white doctor’s coat with blue jeans. He’s in his mid- thirties or early forties and has been practicing dermatology for over 20 years. He is kind but firm in his tone. She wonders what she should say. Afterall, she’s been dealing with this kind of “discomfort” since high school and at 22 she has built up a tolerance. No one’s ever asked her if she’s felt “discomfort” ever in her life... not after her father abandoned her, not after her scalp burned and bleed from the relaxer, not after the kids in high school mistook her for a bastard child of her father’s, not after being called a hippo in band camp, and, certainly, not after her skin started to fill with pus and drain. To her, the pain from her skin seemed necessary, as if she deserved to be cursed with such. She wonders: who does this white man think he is asking me about my comfort? She’s been taught to suck it up, all of it.

“Yes, but it’s bearable.” She thinks she should have changed her answer. There’s no reason to be misdiagnosed for something she has no idea really is. The doctor tells the nurse to write down some form of numbers and verbiage that mean nothing to her. She only knows that

she has to next show the doctor the boils underneath her breast. She lifts her left arm, which have similar battle scars leaking.

“Okay. Are lesions on your chest draining like these?” Dr. Thornton points to my arm pits.

“No,” she lies. The whole doctor’s visit has been awkward for her. She’s had to repeat her symptoms twice, for the nurse who checked her in and Dr. Thornton himself, and two times before that when she scheduled the appointment over the phone. The office is small, not too many patients were present when she arrived. She doesn’t know if that’s a good thing. The room she’s being examined in is typical. There are posters on the wall suggesting the best practices for healthy skin, soap and sanitizer line the sink counter, two chairs and a bed take up the most space, and a wide wooden door heads the entrance. She was instructed to change into a flimsy white robe that closes around her chest.

“Well. Let’s check anyway. There could be more inflamed spots underneath the skin,” Dr. Thornton says. She unties the front of her robe and lifts one breast in front of Dr. Thornton and the nurse. They both examine her body like a foreign object. The doctor is unmoved by the amount of boils she has, the smell coming from them, and her nervousness about the encounter.

“Are there other areas that have been affected?” Dr. Thornton asks, still probing at her. She wants to lie again. She doesn’t want to tell him that there are boils on her butt and groin too. She doesn’t want to strip down to nothing. And she wants the visit to finally end.

“Uh, yeah, there have been some on my butt too,” she stammers. She really wants the doctor to find out what’s wrong with her. She resolves that a cure may outweigh the pain and humiliation.

“Don’t worry. I won’t ask to see them,” Dr. Thornton chuckles. She does too, nervously. The doctor leaves and asks her to change back into her clothes. When he comes back, she is excited to know what exactly to call the embarrassing pain she’s been holding in.

“What you have is hidradenitis suppurativa. It’s an autoimmune disease. Research has shown that there is no known reason for it and no known cure. It is chronic but with proper medications it can help stop more boils from forming and, possibly, ease the pain,” Dr. Thornton says this to her, holding a clip board and sitting on a step stool straight in front of her. His words are slow and calculated like listening to a teacher explain a lesson to students. His voice is distant, though. She blinks and looks down at her yellow finger-nail polish for some time. She has stopped listening after the doctor says “chronic.”

“So, I will be dealing with this for the rest of my life,” she mumbles while still playing with the dirt underneath her fingernails.

I remember calling my mother on the car ride home from the dermatology’s office. I guess I expected sympathy or empathy or someone to just listen and ease my frustration.

“Okay, Nee. Did he prescribe anything to you?” my mom asks.

“Yes, but it won’t cure the HS,” I say almost close to tears.

“So, deal with it,” she says flatly. My mother is unmoved by my newfound condition and doesn’t budge when I tell her it is chronic. She is used to just “dealing with it” whenever anything hard in life happens. No one has ever come to her rescue so why should I think someone will come to mine.

Possessed I Guess? or Reversing

A week after my mother calls me a name no one ever has I find myself in the office of a campus therapist. Last week my mother suggested that I was possessed. With what, I am still trying to figure out. The campus counselor is a white woman, mature, with dark brown hair. She may be the same age as my mother, which doesn't make this any less awkward.

"So, tell me why're here," Dr. Stanton says. She is calm and patient. She has a notepad resting across her lap and a white pen in her hand. Her other hand rests on top of the notepad. The office is small but comfy. There are no lights on save for the dark blue desk lamp and the marlin mascot throw blanket laid across the back of the gray couch I'm sitting on. I am uncomfortable at the least. My friend recommended her to me after I explained my story to her.

My mother is more concerned about the amount of time I spend at college than about the grades I am getting while there. I see her less and less so maybe that's why she thinks I'm being controlled by demon spirits. My older sisters have both had similar actions to mine, but my mother wasn't as hard on them as she is with me. She tells me she's worried about my safety not what I'm actually doing. But I know that's a lie. My sisters have both been to college and done shameful things. Some which my mother is aware of and others she isn't. While I am commuting to Virginia Wesleyan College my sister, Shanelle, is staying on campus at Virginia State University. My other sister has moved out from my childhood home and into her own apartment two years ago. But my mother does not keep tabs on them. She doesn't call them in the middle of the night wondering about their "safety."

I was surprised my friend decided to even go talk to someone. She had shared with me her experiences plagued by the dark trauma from her past. But black people have a stigma about going to see therapists or, mainly, telling white folk about their business. And, on top of that, my

mother always had a what-goes-on-in-this-house-stays-in-this-house kind of attitude. But I figured if my friend had talked to someone, found some help outside of her own, and had kept up with the routine once a week then, maybe this therapist could help me too. I had no one else I could talk to (or I refused to talk) about what I was going through or how to exactly put it into words.

“I don’t know where to start,” I say. I am honest, though, I don’t want to be.

“That’s okay. Lots of people come here and say the same thing.” She takes the cap off of her white pen and relaxes her shoulders. Her relatability makes me nervous. So, I begin at the beginning and slowly try to make sense of what doesn’t.

“My mother, I love her, but I don’t know why she thinks I’m possessed.”

“Is that something you know or just assume?”

“No, she’s told me more than once that she thinks I am possessed. It all happened when I joined this new church. She was suspicious at first, but I thought she was okay with it,” I say while twirling together the ends of my box braids. My mother has always been religious. My home church is non-denominational by choice, but it has roots in the Baptist-Evangelical sect. She has put her hope in God more than any man and, naturally, wanted my sisters and I to do the same. So, when I made the decision to officially leave my home church of 19 years it was harder than anything I’ve had to do. Much like cutting my hair, this decision was made completely on my own.

I explain to the therapist that I usually spend my weeknights at the dorm room of my friends and crash on the couch. I see my mother when I run out of money, clothes, or food. She, basically, lives a single life and has refused to date outside her marriage, or what’s left of it. Her days usually include going to work, going to church, watching her favorite television shows,

cooking for a huge family even though it's just me and her, and going to sleep only to wake up and do it all over again.

"Do you have an idea as to why she would call you that?" Dr. Stanton says, unmoved. Maybe she has dealt with daughters whose mother believes have a certain supernatural possession.

"I left my home church and joined a new one," I say with disbelief. There are plenty of other things a 20-something-year-old could be involved in or not involved in for that matter. My sisters have done far worse things that would cause my mother to play the religion card, but they've never received this kind of ridicule. I mean, it isn't like I'm joining a new religion.

"She's visited my new church a few times before and has met my pastor on various occasions. But I don't think it has anything to do with that." My mother has met my pastor, visited his home, even cooked dinner for his kids. But I know all of that was to test him, to see what he was really about. I believe she has a problem with trusting men, what with her relationship with my father. Obviously, she wanted to make sure he wasn't some minster trying to take advantage of me.

On the night she drops me off at my new church she said: "Nee, I think you're possessed," right before I walked inside. And she added, "I pray your eyes be opened." I made sure to slam the car door behind me to signal my frustration. There was no way for me to respond to that. I mean, how does one convince her mother she is not possessed? I knew she had her reservations about my new church: "the pastor is too young, the church plant is too new, the members are too worldly" – but I never thought she would blame them of possessing me. I imagined her nightly prayers consisted of demanding God to free me from the cult I joined and make my eyes open to their controlling ways. My mother does not like change or even the least

bit open to it. I know her to be stagnant and immovable like an oak tree planted years before I was born, unbending, only to break with the force of a true storm.

“So, what do you think it has to do with?” Dr. Stanton asks and jerks me out of my daydream.

“My growing up or her letting go,” I say honestly. I have thought long about why my mother would take an attack on my new church home. Of all things, I thought she’d be happy for me. And at first, she was. Her support of my leaving my home church was so much that I felt grounded in my decision. It wasn’t until I was invited by a friend that I even decided to leave. The church I joined is the complete opposite of my home church, mainly, a place with people who care, and I can relate to. I’d split my time volunteering there and studying for midterms at school which left next to no time with my mother. And I guess, made her consider that I had to be possessed. It had been a tradition for my mother and I to spend weekends together, getting mani-pedis and eating brunch. In a sense, I felt she was sensing that she no longer had her little girl, which was true. My mother could see my growth and that it was good for me but there was something else, stronger than her happiness for me was her need to have control over me.

“What do you mean by that?” the therapist asks.

“Well, I am the youngest of three girls and I am beginning to be my own person, but I don’t think she likes that. I don’t know, I just don’t feel like she understands how much she’s trying to keep control over me or how much it hurts that she doesn’t trust my decisions.” If anyone has met my mother, they know she’s the nicest person they’ve ever met, she’s forgiving, and is always patient, especially with young children. I just wish she would give a little more grace to me in those areas.

“How does that make you feel?”

“It makes me feel incompetent, like I’m unable to make my own choices without messing it up. It makes me feel like she’d prefer me to be more like my sisters or more like *her*. I feel like she will never grow to see me as a woman and not just her little girl.” My mother has welcomed me most of my childhood because of my innate desire to be different. If my sisters wanted ice cream, I chose cake. If my sisters were going to prom, I chose to stay home. If one of my sisters wanted a new purse for Christmas, I chose a new Kindle. And if my sisters wanted straight hair, I chose all natural.

“Have you told her any of this?”

“No,” I say while looking at the ceiling. The entire visit is strange for me. My mother calling me possessed is even stranger. I can’t seem to make eye contact with Dr. Stanton anymore because I feel a small twinge of judgment, but I know that’s all in my head.

“Do you think she deserves to know how you feel?”

“Yeah, I guess.” I don’t believe I’ve ever talked to my mother about my feelings. That subject just never seemed like one she’d care to know about. My feelings, emotions, and inner thoughts I keep to myself or write in my journal. But I would never tell my mom because she’s never told me her own. I’ve spent my childhood following exactly what she says to the T for fear of not wanting to cause her any pain. Most of which came from my father. But telling her that I don’t want to be someone she wants me to be seems like it would hurt her more than anything.

“So, here’s what I want you to do. Talk to her about how you feel,” the therapist says.

“Tell her the same way you’ve told me. And I’d like to see you next week.”

The therapist tries to make me feel less awkward by telling me a story (completely unrelated to why I’m there) about her dog dying in college. Her parents didn’t tell her when her beloved pup passed while in school for fear of her becoming distracted and flunking out. But

when she comes home for break, she is upset about the dog but more so because her parents refused to tell her. She demanded that her emotions weren't as fragile as they had assumed and that she could handle such bad news. I tell her that that's an interesting story but I'm nothing like that. My mother probably would call and force me to come home for his funeral.

We make an appointment for the same day and time the following week and I make myself comfortable with the idea of telling my mom the truth.

Next week, I ask my mother if we can talk. I make plans to stay home that weekend as I am out of food, money, and I need to wash my clothes. I cook dinner and clean up both bathrooms, so she'll have nothing to complain about. My childhood home is a four-bedroom, two bath, two story on a loud street in Cradock. But my mother made it her business to make it feel like a mansion.

I figure we will be there alone, just the two of us, but both of my sisters decide to visit home this weekend as well. Between catching up on my sisters' lives and making herself busier around the house, I resolve to find the time for us to talk later. Sunday morning, I meet her in the bathroom, her sanctuary as she calls it, while she's brushing her teeth and I tell myself it's now or never.

"Hey, ma. Can we talk?"

"Sure, Nee. About what?" she says through brushes. I feel like I have her in a perfect spot. She's brushing her teeth so there's no way for her to cut me off. And the door is on the opposite side of where I'm standing so no way for me to back out of it either. I sit down on top of the purple toilet seat cover and prepare for the worst.

"Well, I wanted to talk about me and my maturity," I say, awkwardly. This feels like critiquing a painter about his painting as if he's unaware of the blemishes.

“Yeah, you are growing up, Nee,” she says trying to smile.

“Yeah, I just turned 20 last July,” I say trying to buy time.

“Yes, I was there. Bought you balloons too,” she says clicking her power toothbrush up a notch.

“But, don’t tell me you came in here to talk about a 21st-birthday gift already. It’s only November.”

“Nah, I just, um, so I guess I wanted to say that I’m growing up now and I don’t think you are taking it well,” I pause to see if I can gage her reactions. My fight or flight instincts are kicking in. But my mom says nothing. Her face is unmoved, well, as much as can be over top of her brushing. I figure that’s a good thing, so I continue.

“I feel like you don’t understand that I can make my own decisions and sometimes when you don’t agree with me or mock me, it makes me feel incompetent.” She has spit out all the Crest blue toothpaste in her mouth and turns to the left side where I’m sitting on top of the toilet seat’s lid. My mother’s face is stoic as if she’s almost hurt to hear me say it. Almost.

“Nee, I didn’t know you felt that way. I understand you’re growing up and you can make your own choices,” she says looking me straight in the eyes with her left hand on her hip. I hate when she looks me in the eye because I feel like I can’t hide.

“Okay so, why don’t you like the church I joined? Why do you keep calling me possessed?” I say. I am playing with my braids again and I start to sweat. On a scale of one to ten, this conversation is probably the most honest I’ve been with my mom, and the one causing me the most stress. I don’t like not knowing her thoughts, her *real* thoughts as I’m sure she’s trying to keep me and my emotions safe. However, I am sure she understands my hurt.

“Just because I don’t agree with you on everything doesn’t mean I don’t support you. I know we probably won’t see eye-to-eye when it comes to your church or your pastor,” she says, still standing over me and shifting her stance in her white fuzzy slippers.

“Oh-kay, so, I guess that’s good?” I say confused. My mom has always been my number one cheerleader so it’s hard not having her in my corner on this one.

“But... can you stop using the anointing oil on me,” I ask trying my best to laugh. I am completely serious, though. She’s been using anointing oil on all the doorknobs in the house, on all the appliances in the kitchen and on my desk and dresser drawers. Everything I touch leaves extra virgin olive oil and a faint scent of frankincense on my hands. I’m sure she’s prayed over it and adds more everyday. My whole family knows she only brings out the oil on special occasions: communion Sunday, first day of work/school, and now to cast out spirits of possession from her daughter.

“I can’t promise you that, but I will try my best,” she says. I roll my eyes. Maybe she still doesn’t get it.

“But I do love you and I support your decisions, even if I don’t agree with them,” she says. Then she kisses my forehead.

At the meeting with my therapist the next week she asks how my talk went with my mom.

“Pretty good, surprisingly,” I respond.

Her office is similar to the way it looked the first time I visited, the only thing that’s changed is her outfit. Dr. Stanton is wearing a white button up collar shirt and tan slacks. She’s the definition of Plain Jane. The blue coffee mug with the marlin logo is still on her desk and her white pen is still in her hand. This time, though, she leaves the cap on.

“That’s wonderful news. Do you think you accomplished what you set out to do?” I lift my face up toward the ceiling not because I’m nervous, but I want to find the right words to answer her question.

What had I “set out” to do? Explain to my mother my feelings? Tell her I don’t like how she makes me feel? Corner her in our bathroom at eight in the morning? Feel like a failure because I can’t make her happy? Or a combination of all these things?

“I don’t know... I mean, sure. Yeah,” I stumble over my words and even she doesn’t believe me. My mother has been the only person I’ve never wanted to see upset, especially because of me. Not because of her temper, I don’t believe she has one, but because she’s already experienced beyond upset. And I know anyone who’s experienced beyond upset doesn’t want to go back to that place. That one thing is what drove me most of my young life but, now, everything’s changing. I feel like I’m the cause of her experiencing that place again.

My father was usually the cause, not me. I’ve never done anything to make my mother the slightest bit upset save for being different from sisters, but this is not the same. I was the good child who always got grades, had a good attitude and good hair. Naturally, I’ve never seen her cry either. Her tears only surface while watching “Four Weddings” on T.V or cheesy love stories like “Love & Basketball.” And in those moments, I wonder if she thought her life would turn out that way when she was a young girl. I wonder if she thought a fairytale wedding and princess ball gown would be the defining moment of her marriage. Maybe she dreamed of having a prince charming to sweep her off her feet. And maybe she thought that would be my father. I’m sure she would have never chosen the life of a single parent of three. I wish I could bottle up those vulnerable moments so that whenever events upset her, I can grab them and say, “Look, these tears? They were of joy. Proof you’re human. Proof you can’t handle it all alone.”

So, had I accomplished what I “set out” to do? Did I do my best in being vulnerable and open? Had I shared with her all the things that make me question if she will still love me if I don’t do what she wants? Did I tell her I fear that I won’t grow up to be strong like her? Or that I’m really sorry that my father ended up a deadbeat?

No.

“Can you explain what you mean,” Dr. Stanton is, again, extremely patient. But I’m not as nervous as I was during our first meeting. I’m actually enjoying this conversation about my mother. I look straight at Dr. Stanton and say, “Yes, I talked to my mom and it went great. She listened to me and I heard what she had to say. She told me she understands that I am an individual and that I am making my own decisions.”

“Hm, okay that’s good,” she says writing something down in her notepad. I wanted to throw it out the window.

“So, tell me something, why do you think your mother is the way she is,” she asks. I am confused. I thought this session was about me.

“I don’t know. I guess it’s a learned behavior.” Two years of college psychology taught me that much.

“Would you say she learned that behavior from her mother?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. Or from someone else she knows.” Psychology also taught me that a lot of behaviors are inherited and, if not checked, become passed down to other generations, too.

“So, would you say you now have the job of reversing those behaviors?” Dr. Stanton asks, well sort of.

“I guess I do,” I say and make note in my mind to do exactly that.

Medication Guide

HUMIRA affects your immune system.

lowers ability to fight
serious infections
tuberculosis
viruses, fungi, bacteria

spread throughout

people died.

your doctor should
your doctor should
your should not

unless you're okay.

before starting, tell if
you have an infection or symptoms

fever, sweats, body aches, cough, diarrhea,
pain
burning
feel tired

breath

blood

loss

normal.

Family Dinner or Resilience

Family dinners are usually the highlight of any social gathering for my family. I mean, if it ain't food, it ain't a party. The matriarch of the family, my mom's mother, is known for her baked lasagna and slow cooked pig's feet. So much so, that my cousins and, and some of my friends, ask for it when they visit her. Most birthday parties, Christmas dinners and cook outs, yes, cook outs, are not complete unless these two dishes are there.

I hate telling my grandmother "no" when it comes to her food. It seems it's an insult to her that cuts deeper than calling her any other ugly name. Refusing her food is like refusing her closest, most treasured item. Food has been the string connecting my family across state lines especially when we can't see each other. My grandmother's house always smells of sweet potato pie and baked turkey. She often cooks for a full family even if no one visits her anymore. During one summer that seemed to never end, she hosted *another* cook out. My uncles take turns barbequing the meats and smoking the ribs with the new grill and smoker they bought her. They see it as more of a pleasure than a chore. My grandmother doesn't even know how to use a propane grill. Her place of safety is in the kitchen.

I gave up eating red meat and pork when I started undergrad so telling my grandma no to her signature dishes were commonplace. By now, she doesn't even ask me anymore. However, the restrictions of a new diet I'm on cause me to feel an unusual sense of distance from everyone.

My aunt Charlene noticed and asked, "so, what did you bring to eat?" She knows the diet I am on is supposed to reverse the effects of my chronic skin condition. She also knows I pack my own dinner everywhere I go. I opened my Tupperware bowl and place my dinner of sweet potatoes, brussels sprouts and baked chicken in the microwave. I make sure to bring my own

seasonings and butter for cross contamination is a huge possibility with all the ingredients in my grandmother's pantry.

"Um, some chicken and sweet potatoes," I responded. The diet restricts pretty much everything that tastes good including dairy and nightshade vegetables. I explain to my family why I'm doing this, that my body needs to heal and that there is no medicine on the market that will completely rid me of the bumps and boils that form on my skin. But I know they don't understand and, therefore, don't care too much. My sacrifices seem trivial to them, but they do admire my resilience.

"How long have you been on it," she asked.

"I just started eliminating foods three weeks ago. But this is my first full week." The autoimmune protocol or AIP diet calls for eliminating food groups that usually cause a leaky gut signaling the inflammation on my skin. I always thought that those connections between gut health and skin health were strange but all it is beginning to make sense.

"How do you feel?"

I am surprised to see that she actually cares about my feelings. Anyone I've told about my diet seems to think it's just another diet, that it can be broken with small cheat days in between. But, with something like AIP and HS, I don't have the pleasure of cheating. One day of cheating can set me back to day one. The research I've done proves that people on the diet begin to see desired results (remission) in 30 to 90 days straight, no cheating.

"I'm okay, for now. I usually don't get cravings until I see or smell food I can't have," I said. And at this cookout there are many foods to crave.

"So, what cravings have you had?"

“Well, I’ve had cravings for oatmeal last week. This week I’ve been craving omelets and cheese,” I said laughing. On all of the diets I’ve done in the past this one is the most bizarre. I had no idea that foods like whole grains, eggs, caffeine, and tomatoes could cause inflammation. Because most of my past eating habits have included whole grains, legumes and, of course, tomatoes, eggplants and hot peppers (hot sauce is considered a seasoning in my family), I knew it would take a while for my digestive system to heal from the damage. I just wasn’t expecting the cravings to be so vicious.

“I also crave coffee every. single. day.”

“You can’t have coffee either,” my grandmother asked as she entered the living room where we were sitting. My mother, another aunt, and my cousin join her. My grandma is an avid coffee drinker as well as I, that is something we’ve always bonded over.

“Nope.”

“Wow, Nee Nee. I don’t understand what kind of diet you’re on now. I don’t know how to cook for you” my grandmother said. I know she really tries to accommodate everyone. She stopped seasoning the collard greens with pork when she found out my uncle gave it up a few years ago. But there is no way she can fathom removing corn bread and butter from her kitchen, even if it is to accommodate me. She just doesn’t know how to prepare healthy foods.

“Did you eat something here?”

“No, I brought my own food.”

“Did you get enough to eat?” My grandmother sees this as caring and affection. And in many ways, it is, however, it was also the reason why I was overweight most of my life. Her recipes along with my mother never being home to cook dinner left my sisters and I to choose

whatever we wanted to eat with no immediate consequences, expect for our mid sections growing out of control.

My grandmother's question is a trigger now, though. I have been starving ever since I've started this diet and I don't like it. I already lost ten pounds in one week and my headaches haven't gone away. So, along with the constant pain of my skin condition, I have to deal with being constantly hungry and a recurring headache.

My maternal grandmother's trigger questions aren't as bad as my paternal grandmother's statements, though. When my sisters and I were younger and would visit my father's parents, they always had cookies at the house. So, naturally, I wanted one. My grandma made a big fuss about it before finally giving us one, only one. It was our allowance for that day because, she thought, we'd had enough.

"Every time I see you girls, you just keep getting bigger and bigger," my grandmother said to us. We were visiting my grandparents' house often that week because my mother picked up more hours at her new job. My grandmother needed help around the house, cooking and cleaning, but my oldest sister did all that. I only came because I was too young to be left at home alone. Their house always smelt like moth balls and musty socks. The grandfather clock rang, obnoxiously, every hour. And its sound always creeped me out. It was as if the batteries' juice ran out a long time ago and they just kept it in there, barely working. I'm not even sure if that thing had batteries. Maybe it was so old that it only required to be plugged in.

Shyanne rolled her eyes at her after she called us big, again. Shanelle leaves the room and I stare at my grandmother, smiling. The house is too small for us to be walking around like we don't like each other. My grandparents had a stuffy one story on a dead-end street in Portsmouth, VA. The street, much like their house, and their thinking is extremely narrow. At that point in

my childhood, my mom's mother lived in New Jersey, so we didn't have access to her as much. However, we were much closer to her than we were to my father's parents. We rarely saw them, my grandparents didn't like watching us and my mother had stopped asking them a long time ago, way before I was old enough to start grade school.

My grandmother on my father's side was a small woman in voice and frame. She wore her hair in a starchy funnel that reminded me of crème-filled swiss rolls. And she always kept cookies in her pantry for us when we came to visit. So, when she makes this comment, I made no recollection of it in my mind because I knew she would give me a cookie if I waited long enough. It was like a weird game she'd play with us. She made us ask for a cookie or whatever other sweet she had in her house, just to humiliate us then give us what we asked for. I wonder if she found it amusing or if that was just her way of showing us that she was a loving grandmother. Either way, her and my grandfather's presence was extremely distant and in a lot of ways just like my father's presence.

My sister breaks my reverie by saying: "Well, that's her fault." And I try my best to blink back tears. I excuse myself from my grandmother's living room and make my way to my tiny Ford Focus sitting in her driveway. My sister's comment felt like another blow to my self-esteem like an insecurity I couldn't escape. And even though I wasn't as heavy as I used to be when we were little, dealing with a skin disease that seeks to put the same kinds of parameters on me that being overweight did, makes her comment more lethal.

Weight Problem or Their Problem

I walk into the gym late, as usual, tripping over my Nikes and black Puma gym bag. I forget the group is required to do ten push-ups if anyone is late. I don't consider them a family but, for this one weekend, we are one. I can feel the stares as we count out the numbers together. I do them all on my palms and toes while the white women beside me do five on their knees and manicured nails.

Day one was unforgettable. I lifted, squatted, and jumped like I was training for a marathon while the other participants, mostly women – white women – did the workouts like it hurt their heart more than their bodies to see me, twice their size, and twice their strength, run through the workouts with ease. I am strong, not for a girl, but just strong. It looked like if they lifted anything close to what I was, they would break. I chose a spot up front to show the instructor, another white woman, that I was more than capable of being a Group Power instructor and strong enough to prove it. I didn't have any meaningful conversations with those “family members” that day. But it was the looks that spoke up when their mouths didn't.

The first days afforded me nothing but stares and a reason to mean-mug back. I was grouped together with women in their late 30s. They were quirky and thin. But they all had the same look when I walked through the fitness room doors. It's the face you make when you're puzzled beyond belief. It said *Who does she think she is? Aren't you too big to be a fitness instructor? How can she be a fitness instructor looking like that?* When you grow up big and black you know what to expect, so I got ahead of it.

By day three, I am exhausted. I forget this group is the enemy. I have worked hard to embrace what and who I've been fighting to look like all my life. *I remember something I've*

learned in third grade about lotus flowers submerged underwater. How the water doesn't drown it but forces the flower to blossom better...

"So, what gym are you from," one of the women asks me while at lunch. I made myself sit with a new group during our lunch break every day, even though I'd rather eat alone.

"Effingham St. YMCA," I respond. The group is kind. I'm caught.

"Oh, my gym isn't too far from there. I teach at the Churchland Branch," she says.

"Oh, yeah, I've been there before," I say, trying not to say too much but just enough.

"Does your gym have Group Power classes already," my frenemy asks.

"Yes, Group Power was launched there last year," I say impassively. The Churchland YMCA is known for its exclusiveness. It was opened to all members of the YMCA a few years ago, up until then it was private. She, along with the group of women I was sitting with, all belonged to that branch. They have a kind of arrogance when they speak of *their* Y and a small dislike when I mention *mine*.

"Isn't that a small Y."

"Yeah, it's a family Y. Everyone knows each other." My trainer told me instructors refuse to work at Effingham for fear of members not showing up to class, fear of being *in* downtown Portsmouth, fear of nonchalant participants, or a combination of all three. They look at me as if I've confirmed their fears and beliefs. I am a product of my city with the battle scars to prove it, only more consistent and involved with my health.

"Y'all should visit sometime. Group Power class is on Monday and Wednesday nights at 6pm and Saturdays at 10am."

"Yeah, okay. I think I get off early on Mondays" they say, knowing they'll never show.

on being

i thought it'd be easier
adjusting to new

can be both tragic
and longing

my loved ones aren't being
at all lovable

i hate the feeling – different
for losing the old.

i thought being
would make them

see me better.
once was included

now othered, all because
food is the key

became the evil in between
that destroyed the familial communion

the adjustment proved
to be impossible

the connection once
had through food - died.

a known happiness
and strange death

for breaking what's normal
or at least for my family.

it is passed down,
the formula and chain:

recipes, overeating,
gain.

no one escapes
save for me.

the cycle of bad habit
consumed from my

grandmother's kitchen table,
made escaping intimidating.

and when i finally accept
the transition as a thing

to be praised,
it isn't.

maybe they see the truth
one i smother deep down.

only my darkest thoughts
could conjure it up

i assumed transition
would mean acceptance.

how belittling to believe?
and ain't that funny?

i've wanted to be little
in figure, personality, thinking

less of me would make others
accept me more.

can? will? ever?
in normal conversations

i have to answer
why i'm losing

weight, as if good
health isn't enough.

"you got a new man in your life?"
"you trynna disappear on us?"

"nee, stop starving
yourself and eat this fried donut."

then comes the hate

not being able to
do something i've accomplished –
equals disgust?

why is being happy
considered a loss?

Father's Day Card or Trying

I am crying in the middle of a Walgreens Pharmacy while picking out a Father's Day card. I have never felt the urge to do so, buying a card for my father, that is. All of the nice, fluffy and sentimental language of the cards never excited me. And I never wanted to, or actually meant, those words before. The stranger beside me, a woman with dark features and a beautiful Sunday dress on, hears my sobs, I am sure.

I wonder if she thinks I'm silly for crying like a baby in the middle of a pharmacy at 4pm on a Thursday. The tears come because I desperately want my father to be those things the card mentions: a good father, a pillar of strength, a man I love and look up to. None of these seem quite right. Even the Hallmark Mahogany brand greeting cards don't even fit. I'd thought they'd, at least know the plight of a young black girl with an absentee father. The tell-tale signs of such include: childhood trauma, chronic trust issues and, my personal favorite, the cycle of abandonment and rejection. My father has never been much of one and, in many ways, I am still angry with him, at him because of the way my life unraveled. I wouldn't say I blamed him for it. But I'm sure the version of me I know at 24 wouldn't understand the version of me at 15 if my father was physically and emotionally present. Sometimes I dream him to be this monster who only comes to haunt me of all the things I've missed. Care, affection, or love are of which my father never could give properly.

I pull myself together, begin staring around to see who's eyeballing me. There is no one. The woman with the pretty dress has chosen a card that I hadn't even picked up for on its cover, it read: *To My Father, The Reason I Am Who I Am Today* or maybe it said: *To The Man Who Always Be There For Me* along with some over sap greeting inside the flap. All of the cards

begin to read like a foreign language, and I can't take this kind of assault any longer. I resolve to leave the store and begin again tomorrow.

My father chose a distant life or, at least, that's how my adolescent mind conceived it. Distant is how I've always seen him. But when I return from studying in the south of France, things just seem different. He is released from prison six months after I return home and I can feel that my mom doesn't need me anymore. In the year my father has been home, I can tell he is starting to care more about trivial things like my favorite color and why I chose to cut my hair. He's exhibiting more effort than he did when I was 15 years old. At first, I don't like it. Learning to live with a man you call father but have only known through the limitations of timed visits and handwritten letters is beyond weird. I want to hate him and hold grudges and make him to be the monster he has always been in my dreams. My sisters and I have inevitably held the same kind of attitude toward my father, and I have seen nothing wrong. But nowadays I know better.

My feelings toward my father have begun to change at the slightest because of my spiritual father. His father-like attention and affection to me has been altogether different, uncomfortable, and rewarding. I've always had a certain disdain for people, mainly men, in authority, which is all related to my father not being present. But it didn't make life any easier and those feelings of hatred came more often than I thought. One of my first encounters with my spiritual-father, I told him exactly how I felt.

It was the summer after my first year of college when one of my close friends invited me to Krispy Kreme for Crews. I knew she had a strong religious background, which is how we connected in high school, so I should have expected Crews to be a conversation led by a minister. I was uncomfortable because I hadn't been to my home church and hadn't thought about visiting any since I started college. But, because she was one of my best friends and I was

bored, I agreed to go. I was uneasy and acting strange the entire time. But, the funny thing is, I didn't know who I was meeting but they were cool. It was like meeting up with people I had always been friends with.

Naturally, I had a nasty attitude toward him, the minister that is. I wasn't used to men being nice without soon leaving or taking advantage of me. On that particular night, after I got overly annoyed about this very fact, I ask, "So, why do you care so much?" And Pastor Lou responded, "Why shouldn't I?" As if a man couldn't genuinely care. My uncles and cousins have never invested in my life the way Pastor Lou began to, so after four years of knowing him as "dad." I decided to buy him a Father's Day card.

I just hadn't expected to feel guilty about it.

The next day I begin looking for a card with the right words again. I am amused by my actions the day before, but I don't have enough confidence to go back to the same store. I purchased a card for my pastor last week when the thought crossed my mind to buy my biological father one. It made me feel right and wrong at once. I guess I'm trying to pacify the situation or my thoughts by buying both men who, in my life, hold the same title a similar token of thanks. My dilemma, though, only sprouted from the guilt I felt for ignoring my father on the biggest day of his, or what should be. What kind of daughter doesn't buy her father a card for Father's Day? I felt pathetic.

I ended up at another pharmacy searching the shelves for cards that said the least on the front and nothing in the inside. I figured a blank card would suffice.

How to Explain Your Chronic Skin Disease to People

1. Tell people to research.

It is crucial that you tell them to do their own research because saying “hidradenitis suppurativa” gives you a headache. It may cause people to feel ignorant, or so they should. It is, honestly, a disease that is still unknown to many. Your frustration with trying to pronounce the word once your dermatologist says it frightens you because you pride yourself on pronouncing words the right way. Years of teachers, strangers and so-called friends pronouncing your name wrong, forces you to find the beauty in the difficulty of language. No matter if your tongue disagrees.

HS is something you haven’t even researched much yourself. Your doctor will hand you pamphlets which provide websites where you can “learn more about your condition” because he, obviously, has no clue what *it* actually is. You wonder if he should stay your prized specialist in dealing with HS. He does not care for he cannot know, personally, what it is to experience it. And so, you tell others to summon the worst possible pain they can think and imagine that. For days.

2. Tell them how it feels.

You are not a doctor or an expert in autoimmune diseases, by any means. So, you describe what it feels like to have hidradenitis suppurativa. Everything hurts. At all times, your body is in pain. At all times of the day. You will learn how to deal with it because dealing with discomfort is what you’ve been programmed to do. Being female and black affords no sympathy to pain.

The worst part is the itching at night when you want nothing more than to actually sleep, you are up scratching uncontrollably. You learn that any place the skin meets can produce said areas of itching. What’s worse than that is the draining. You walk around with small panty liners, pads

and tissues on your skin to soak up the cream-colored pus, blood and water coming from small boils on your body.

Nothing compares to the smell, though. You wonder how you've lasted this long with only your mom, older sisters, and best friends knowing of the condition, of the smell. The smell reminds you of spoiled meat. The fear of getting close to anyone horrifies you. You assume people will think you repulsive. Your body has never been an object of good. You hide it, your tiny feelings and your worrisome HS from the world.

You think a routine of showering twice a day, will end the pain and thus, ending the smell. You think that maybe you don't wash enough. Maybe you should try showering three times a day. Or with a different soap. Nothing works. You resolve to accepting the condition as a necessary pain because life has taught you to expect *it* as a reward for being born black and female. Ever since your father abandoned his role as father for inmate, you know that life seems to work against you.

3. Describe how your body is attacking itself.

You know from research that whatever is causing your body to produce cysts or inflamed boils, cause them to fill up with pus, and drain constantly can only be explained as your body malfunctioning. It thinks whatever good things you put into it is bad, so it attacks the foreign invaders.

You know your immune system strongest compared to others. You have never gotten the flu. You were 12 years old the last time you got strep throat, or even a common cold. Your mother tells you this as fact. You are beyond angry at how much your body hates itself. You wonder if this is payback the years you spent hating it. You've hated your skin, size, and hair for not being "beautiful", for wishing it would submit to other people's ideas of pretty.

4. Explain what it is and is not.

Poor hygiene, body weight, and diet does not cause HS. In fact, there is no known cause for your body's malfunction. It is not contagious and, if you would have never told anyone, no one would know. There is no known cure, and you are afraid of having to deal with the chronic disease for the rest of your life. You hear talk of autoimmune and autoinflammatory conditions being cured by beginning an autoimmune protocol diet (AIP), but you have tried diets before and are suspicious of the lies.

5. You wish it would end.

You find no safe haven talking to family or friends about your HS. They don't completely understand what it is like to be, not thrive with HS. Your mother will become your constant confidant as she feels the most sorrow for you. She's told you before that, "I wish it was me with it and not you." You will accept this sentiment with grace. But you often wonder if you inherited the disease from her. You try praying but wonder if God stopped listening to this prayer a long time ago. You think about ending it yourself. The pain would be over. The embarrassment would end. The constant reminders that you are different or cursed will cease. It seems like the easy way out.

6. Tell them you have a leaky gut.

As is with most autoimmune disorders, your body has confused good food for bad. Thus, your body has tricked itself into believing it should combat the foreign invaders, letting certain trigger foods, along with bad bacteria, from your digestive track "leak" into your gut. You have convinced yourself that this is your portion. You have to un-convince yourself that this is your portion.

You know there are many people who eat whatever they want and never have HS. You envy them like the pretty, thin girls in high school. No matter how hard you diet, exercise or pivot your body just won't get right. You are angry that the 50lbs you lost does nothing to slow your HS down as your ever trusted derm has said it would. You hate that he wants to keep you a malfunctioning patient but not treat your malfunction. You learn after many visits that he wants to keep you healthy but sick enough to keep coming back.

7. Describe your antibiotics.

You hate antibiotics because your lips turn black. And, on top of that, your body is not infected with HS. It needs to heal from it. Your trustworthy derm has been battling with your insurance company to recognize your HS as a real disease and thus, approve your need for Humira. He tells you that it is an expensive drug, so insurance companies don't like paying for it but all you hear is *waw waw waw*.

8. Explain why you shop often.

When you shop for clothes, you are mindful not to buy tanks, sleeve less dresses or anything else that could show underneath the arm. Even the cute cocktail dresses that show lots of cleavage your sisters wear in the summer, you avoid because boils have begun to grow underneath your bra line and around the delicate creases on the sides. Easy to see if someone is looking close enough. You don't buy work-out tops that show underneath arms which are especially useful in the summer months. You buy packs of white tees three at a time because, on any given day, the armpits become soaked with the drainage before noon. You change into a fresh one twice daily. And when you go out, you pack extra wipes in your purse to get rid of the excess leakage before someone notices the cream colored moist showing underneath your shirt's armpits or the smell. This is your new normal.

9. Explain why you wash clothes often.

You spend too much money washing your clothes twice every week, after every wear because the drainage from your boils leaves a nasty stain. You stopped wearing wire bras because they aren't friendly with the open sores on your rib cage. When you reach, bend, or stand the friction from the bra's fabric rubs up against your skin and stings the open sores. Even going to work can be difficult. You will wash your clothes with washing powder for sensitive skin and pay twice as much than the cheaper brands.

10. Tell them you don't know what life is like without it.

Since high school, you have noticed small boils beginning to form under your armpits, which is a sign of HS. But you don't know that yet. So, you tell your mother, but she thinks it is your body changing – puberty and all. When you are 18 years old, pea-like hard bumps begin to form underneath the crease of your breasts, and you are concerned that you may have breast cancer. A few days later, those hard bumps begin to drain and turn into cysts that crave sweat and never heal. You will understand this to be the life cycle of your HS. You tell your mother about your concern again and she tells you to go to the doctor. You hold off on it for fear of embarrassment.

Until you are 22, you keep the secret from almost everyone and finally go to your physician for a clear answer. When you don't get one you find new ways to care for your boils, which don't exactly change anything. Your PCP will suggest a specialist, but you drag your feet into the ground until you reach the soft soil, which forces you to finally cave and go see a dermatologist. He probes at you like a science project and only makes things worse. The words *chronic*, *cure*, and *cause* have never sounded more frightening in the same sentence. You are prescribed Humira and antibiotics that only serve to keep new boils from forming. Except more do come, and you accept this way of life as normal.

11. Explain that Humira is a death sentence.

Your dermatologist prescribed Humira to you, expecting it to work. You don't accept his suggestion at first, so you avoid him for a year. You read about the side effects of Humira, which are all more extreme than what it actually helps. He says you would have to take it for the rest of your life. You don't care. Nothing of what the doctor says makes sense. Humira was created to help people who suffer from other chronic skin diseases. And as far as you know, HS is not a skin disease, but an autoimmune – autoinflammatory one. It is not eczema or psoriasis or scabies. So, you're smart enough to know that any medication on the market could never truly treat HS. But you cave. Again.

You find that it works – only at first. He prescribed you the recommended starter dosage of four pre-filled syringes to be injected in your abdomen all at once. You take the first four like a pro and are required to take one weekly forever more. After a month you notice some boils on your stomach and bra-line begin to drain and close. You feel slightly hopeful and wonder why you waited so long to begin the medication. While on Humira, you experience no side effects as you are sure to be vigilant about what you consume and who you are around. But after two years, the dreaded boils begin to return more vicious than before. The Humira has stopped its magic and your immune system has lost its fight. Until the novel virus called COVID-19, you take Humira faithfully with little to no improvement. Then you vow to find a better way. A natural way to cure your body.

12. Say it's your turn to fight.

You spend hours researching a new diet called the autoimmune protocol or AIP online. You join Facebook groups specifically for "humans with HS." You push past your fear and

embarrassment and decide to educate family members, friends, co-workers, and people at the gym on what your skin condition is.

You learn that the AIP diet is sister to the paleo diet but more restrictive. Everything is off limits save for grass-fed meats, leafy greens, and some fruits. You start by eliminating eggs and dairy for a week, then all grains and pseudo grains, all legumes and beans, all forms of nuts and alcohol for the next week. You follow up with nightshade vegetables, namely, white potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants, hot peppers (including your beloved hot sauce) for the next week. Finally, you let go of both caffeine and sugar and headaches seem to become normalcy for at least two weeks' time. When you are fully on AIP, you crave oatmeal, fluffy omelets, and red velvet cheesecake. But you don't budge. You know that one cheat-day will set you back to day one on your 30-90-day journey. So, you fight as much as you can. You muster up all of the will power you have and pray that God gives you strength when yours runs out.

You are hungry all the time. On day 21, you finally purchase *The Hidden Plague* by Tara Grant you've been debating over for the past three weeks. You find the book by way of the Facebook group who advocates for her and the AIP diet. In it, you feel you have a friend whose experienced exactly what you are going through. But you find that you have to give up vinegar, mushrooms, berries and honey all of which carry yeast which can trigger inflammation in the skin. You are frustrated yet again. But you *man up* like your mother always told you.

You tell your friend to help you with more recipes but she, too, is frustrated at this ridiculous diet. You will respond, "How do you think I feel?" to her response to *your* frustration. You hate when people make your ailment about them. You wonder what makes them uncomfortable for you to tell your truth. Your friend tries her best to give you good-tasting recipes that will be filling but they don't help.

A picture you find in Grant's book of a healthy gut and leaky gut intrigues you. You wonder if a dietitian or nutritionist or any holistic medicine doctor will help cure your gut from the many tiny holes that allow bacteria to spill out of your intestine.

13. Explain your serious episodes of overwhelm-ment.

You cry more often than not. The idea of living with your HS just doesn't sit right with you anymore. But crying seems the only act that makes the condition less unbearable. At least your tear ducts still work. You wonder if you will have to live the rest of your life on the AIP diet. You crave Snickers and Sprite when you start your period and you are more angry, irritated and irrational with you family, friends and co-workers, and strangers on Instagram. You will cry. You will isolate yourself from the kitchen and realize your grocery budget has shot up to \$80-\$100 every week. You don't eat out, after all where could you go? You will eat every bit of food you buy and will not share with your loved ones. You will cry. You will ask God why. You will cry. You keep going.

14. Tell them it's your bullshit doctor's fault.

You have been to see your dermatologist for a total of fifteen times since you sought him out online in 2014. In 2020, you resolve that hidradenitis suppurativa will no longer control your life and wonder why your doctor has not been an advocate of remission instead of barely functioning. You decide that it's his fault for making you take all the medications that don't solve the problem.

On your last visit, like any other, you go into the office, which is 40 minutes from your home, and prepare to give this man a piece of your mind. You know he has no sympathy for you, or he would not keep begging you to see him twice a year, which drains your pockets. When you first ask him about the drug that weakens your immune system and could possibly end in your

untimely death, he responds cynically with, “I would give this to my mother.” This statement makes you avoid him for three years. When you come back to visit him, well, because your HS is worse, he tells you again: “I would give this to my mother.” And you wonder if his mother has HS. Does she deal with the humiliation on a day-to-day? Is her immune system even strong enough to handle the drug? Has she spent the last three years wishing her body had reached the apex of pain, except, with each new boil that forms and grows beneath the skin, she knows there is a higher calling of pain to be known?

But this visit is different, you want him to know, rather, feel your frustration with his medical practices. You want to place the blame on a person, place or thing but the only noun you can think of who deserved the blame was him. The speech you begin in her minds sounds like:

Dear ~~bullshit doctor~~ Dr. Thornton,

You have ~~humiliated and used me as your guinea pig~~ prescribed me Humira and antibiotics since I first met you in 2014. Since then ~~I regret the day I met you~~ my HS has not gotten the slightest bit better. In fact, a combination of both of these has made the state of my health even worse. You ~~lied to me over and over~~ promised me a better quality of life, but I do not have one. On most days, my HS hurts so bad it keeps me from working and I want to ~~slap you in the face~~ say that I no longer wish to be your patient. Sir, I ~~demand~~ encourage you to do some more studying about HS before taking on any more patients with this insidious disease ~~and ruining their lives.~~

You settle down your emotions and decide to go with the less feisty speech, after all, this is a white doctor in a white neighborhood, and you don’t want their white faces judging you for being the typical “angry black woman.”

And even in this, he’s won.

When he asks you if you have any more questions before you leave his office and transcend the examination table in a white hospital gown, you cannot gather your clothes fast enough, let alone your thoughts about the speech. You feel humiliated, again, and all you want is to cover your most delicate parts. You say, “thank you” before he leaves the room as if he’s done something special for you that deserves to be thanked. You decide that this will be your last visit to Dr. Thornton, but you keep silent about it because to be humiliated like this for the last time is enough.

15. Shout about the ineffectiveness of your hormones.

Since you were 14 and experienced your first real menstrual cramp, you thought you had been punished by God. Your sisters had gone through puberty years before you and had not experienced cramps, back pain, bloating, headaches, mood swings, appetite changes, diarrhea or vomiting the way you have. They even thought you were lying about it to get a day off from school. However, your mother knew better, or felt empathy for you. At 14 years old, you’ve learned how to sleep on the floor of the bathroom because it was close to the toilet in case you needed to throw up, which was often throughout the night. You’ve gained a tolerance for pain, which may be some strange superpower you wish you could give back.

You will read the book by Tara Grant that explains in great detail how hormones, sugar, and all other trigger foods are connected and cause inflammation. You feel like someone understands you better than your dermatologist ever could.

16. Explain your silent days.

On most days you wake up to discover nothing has changed with your health save for new flare ups when you eat fruit. You want new recipes for your diet. Though you don’t have many options since you’ve given up both pork and red meat, you figure it will be easier that way.

You've learned to be okay with it. In the early morning, you take your zinc, omega 3s, vitamin D3 and a teaspoon of sea moss with your caffeine free, seed free herbal tea. Unless someone asks, you don't tell them much of your pain, frustration, or overwhelm-ment so you remain silent on most days. Today, though, you make sure to wear your new black t-shirt with the words "YOU'RE ACCEPTED" in bold, white letters written across the front. You bought it from your friend who makes T's. It's made with the same soft cotton of your white t-shirts and fits like a new opportunity. You text your friend to order five more so you can prepare yourself to change at noon.

To Daddy's Girl
– the written apology which my father never made

I didn't mean it.
When I left you speechless
and your mother singlehanded
single handling you and your sisters.

You grew in abandonment.
I didn't know my actions had weight.
Then, time felt incorrigible;
an immeasurable, infinite thing
that I wasted.

In those days
you knew me to be a revolving door.
Life unraveled before me while I was barred,
hidden in a shameful place meant
for fiends and coons not fathers of daughters.

I'm sorry.
I'd like to reverse the past
and make it smooth like the strong
backs of black mothers.

The first time I held you
and bought my bundle of perfection
to the tiny apartment home on Green St,
I became your hero.
Now I'm much less –
just another man who hurt you.

These words probably don't mean enough.
You probably needed more from me.
Now, I know you're strong like your mother
and I am proud of who've you become.
I hope you give me a chance
to be the father you always dreamed of.
I understand if you don't.

Love, and more love,
Dad.

What Change Does or The ‘Rona

It is 3am and I am still awake. I’ve been lying in bed, trolling social media posts and watching silly YouTube clips since midnight. I finally decide to put my phone on the charger, succumbing to its annoying screen time limit feature. I can feel my heart beating in my throat. My forehead draws pools of sweat that roll down my cheeks. My oversized Cincinnati Reds t-shirt is damp all over and sticks to my back and chest. I have a worrisome cough that causes my body to jerk whenever it releases. I fight against my urge to claim any sickness; instead I change my t-shirt and plug my phone up beside my desk instead of my nightstand.

Should I call out tomorrow? But I don’t have any sub plans. What if I still feel this way in the morning? I always sleep with the heat on high, so I turn it off, find the resolve to shut my eyes and shut off my brain, and get back in bed. In two hours, I’m wide awake dressed for war with a large cup of coffee brewed with a double shot of espresso. I watch a news clip informing me that the infamous coronavirus has made its way to Virginia. *Too close.* I hate watching the news anyway. By 6:45am I’m at my desk preparing book work - a teacher’s go-to on Mondays and begin grading essays from the week before.

It’s a half day or Parent-Teacher Conference as my district calls it. At 11:45am all of my students have left, and my caffeinated high is crashing. I began teaching at IC Norcom High School, despite my objection to return to any school. Although I wouldn’t be teaching back at my old high school, I figured working at different one wouldn’t cause me so much trepidation. And this is mostly true, save for the occasional irate parent and stank attitudes of teenagers.

“Did you bring anything for lunch today?” my instructional assistant asks me. She’s short, brown-skinned, and has much more energy than I. She’s perfect for my group of tenth graders, especially in the days I’m a little off, like today.

“Nah, I’m actually not hungry,” I say while placing down my unfinished cup of coffee.

My principal thinks teachers are able to have lunch in fifteen minutes and still be able to have conferences from noon until 2:30pm.

“But you always got something fancy for lunch, girl.” And she’s right. Six months of meal prepping and 50 pounds ago taught me how to prepare before I get an appetite and not the other way around. Ms. Williams and I have shared many lunches together in the month and a half time that I’ve known her. When the students change semesters, instructional assistants have to change with them, and most times it’s not a good fit. But she’s the best assistant I’ve had in my classroom since I began working at I. C. Norcom High School. Mainly because she spends a lot of time engaging with students during classroom discussions, rather than being a fly on the wall. She takes the initiative with getting engulfed in the material, and genuinely cares for the students. I know I can trust her with carrying out a day’s lesson if I am ever absent.

“Yeah, I just don’t have an appetite right now. I’ll get something later. Y’all ‘boutta head out for lunch?” Assistants aren’t required to stay for Parent-Teacher Conferences and from my own personal experience knowing the pay she’s receiving; I don’t blame her.

“Yeah, America’s Best or District?” She asks me while flipping her long ponytail to the side.

“Girl, The District got better wings. Save me some if you’re getting ghost pepper.”

“ ‘Aight, bet.” I have a nasty cough that day, which I’ve had for about a week, but this day is worse. My throat is scratchy and feels like ants are crawling around on my tonsils, and my nose is stuffy like cotton balls are tucked in the back every time I blow it. So, I assume eating something extremely hot would cure all that, an old remedy my grandma used to fix colds.

And like old remedies go, they are either half-truths or full lies.

“Girl, these things is nasty!” I say to My assistant. I only had one parent visit me for conferences and I was impressed with that. Most parents in the city of Portsmouth work two and three jobs, or they work nights and weekends, or are not present enough in their children’s lives to show up to a parent-teacher conference. And if they are *present*, they have younger kids to worry about, their high schooler is already grown enough. The student’s parent who came to see me, I had no reservations about. I knew that student would do well this semester. After the first week, a good teacher can tell what kind of students inhabit their classroom. With the semester being relatively new, I really wanted to meet with some parents today whom I haven’t had the chance to call over the phone. But after an hour of no one showing, I make five phone calls, leave two voicemails, and exit my empty classroom for another.

“Oh, I got Habanero this time,” My assistant responds. The wings are all flats like I like them and all salty like I hate them. I sneeze before I bite into one, holding the tip with my thumb and index finger. I stop and inhale the scent, thinking that would open up my nasal passage. And it did. *Thanks, Grandma.* I meet My assistant in another teacher’s classroom who we’re all cool with. After two bites of the nasty wings and 45 minutes of catching up with the rest of the teachers there, I have no appetite and am still coughing constantly. I have a birthday celebration that afternoon at Roger Brown’s. I figure I will have more of an appetite then.

I’m late to the party but not the last one. I can still feel the annoying heartbeat in my chest as I walk briskly to the table in my three-inch booties.

“Hey, Branch! We saved a seat for you,” one of my co-workers says. We’re sitting at a high table in the far-left side of the restaurant, beside the bar. My co-worker is known to tell all the secrets, especially the ones I’m not aware of because I’m always leaving work early for class. Across from me is another English teacher and next to her is the birthday girl. She teaches

special education at Norcom so she travels a lot throughout the school; however, she's found more of a home with the English Department than any other department she's been with, including her own.

They've already started to order drinks and appetizers. But the service is slow, and I can't keep this question to myself any longer.

"So, does anybody think it's strange when your heartrate is elevated, and you have a sore throat?"

"What's your heartrate?" Mrs. Shaw asks. She is the co-chair of the English Department and just arrived at the table.

"Well, my resting heart rate is 48," I look down at my Apple watch to confirm the BPM.

"And my heartrate now is 92. What does that *mean*?" I direct my question to my work moms (who just walk in and sit on my right side). I call them my teacher-moms, mainly because they all have kids, and I don't.

"Do you have a fever?" the other co-chair, asks and proceeds to feel my forehead with the back of her hand. She has a 15-year-old daughter that keeps her from coming to work on time due to her illness. She is a large woman, much like my mom, and always has crazy stories to cheer me up.

"Am I hot?" I ask my other team member to feel my forehead too. She's had four kids and adopted two so I knew her judgment would be sound. She touches my forehead with the back of her brown, manicured hands.

"Yeah, you are warm," they agree in unison, "maybe you just have a fever?" I pause for a second to think about their words as if they've hit me for the first time, like they've proven what I refused to believe. *Isn't that a symptom of COVID-19?*

“But I don’t feel sick,” I respond trying to counter their arguments. And I don’t. I don’t have a headache, chest pains, chills, shortness of breath, incoherence, slurred speech, nausea or diarrhea. To check off those boxes with a *no* is enough for me.

“Well, I take Humira and I don’t know if that has something to do with it,” I add. Mrs. Hudson takes out her phone and starts typing in her google search bar. I whisper, “Just don’t go to WebMD.”

“Nobody talk about work!” Holli demands each of us, turning her head both ways to make sure everyone’s heard. And with good reason, we typically default to conversations about students, parents, IEPs, teacher relationships, principals’ meetings and everything in between.

Mrs. Hudson shows me what she’s found online about the Humira drug (not via WebMD) and whispers to my left that we’re not discussing work. *Side effects include: Itching, bruising, swelling, bleeding from the injection sight; headache; sinus pain; stuffy nose; dark urine; yellowing eyes; leg pain; tingling; cancer; tuberculosis; and (in extreme cases) death.* All of which I’m pretty sure my dermatologist went over with me before I began the medication. But I know it’s not that. I was aware and skeptical of those side effects about the drug for two years prior to even agreeing to begin dosages. Doctors have always given me chills what with them misdiagnosing my mother with arthritis and ignoring the level of my grandmother’s pain after amputating her foot. I’ve learned to not go to any doctor’s office unless absolutely necessary. Afterall, my grandmother’s remedies haven’t failed me yet. I’ve been taking Humira for over two years and have had no side effects. But my co-worker’s findings get me thinking about what I should do to protect myself from getting sick being that the drug’s main lasting effect is weakening the immune system. I excuse myself from the table to call my doctor and ask one of my teacher moms to order me chicken nachos, no sour cream.

I walk to the bathroom which has about six stalls, all empty. Neyo's *Miss Independent* is blasting through the speakers louder than when they were in the dining room. I do a quick walk through to make sure no one is there and, while standing in front of the full-body mirror, I dial up my PCP.

"Hello, can I schedule an appointment?" I yell so the nurse on the other end can hear me and not Neyo.

"Name and date of birth, please," she says. I give her my credentials before deciding to take the conversation outside.

"What's the reason for your visit?"

"Um, well, I have a fever and I want to know if I should be concerned being that I take other medications that could possibly negatively affect my health," I ramble on and on.

"Okay, did you say *fever*?"

"Yes, I have a fever and I would like to know if I should be concerned being that I take..." I repeat myself as I walk through the restaurant's front doors and out on the sidewalk.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Did you say *fever*?"

"Yes," I hang on to the last syllable. At this point I'm irritated. She obviously doesn't hear me say I have a preexisting condition that could negatively affect my health if I get sick *and* she doesn't hear me say "fever" twice. *Wait... she thinks I have the coronavirus.*

"Okay, we have appointments available today. You can come right now," she says very slow and in a serious tone. Being that it is already after 3:30pm and I really don't feel like driving out 20 minutes to Western Branch, I make an appointment for tomorrow afternoon at four. That way I can go to work if I want and still make it in time for my appointment. I hold my

chest to make sure my heart rate is slowing down, but it's not. *What if I go and have to be quarantined? But what if I don't go and my symptoms get worse? Call the dermatologist next. No, the pharmacist.*

"Hello, can I speak to a pharmacist, please?" I call the pharmacy that fills my prescription every month. I explain to the pharmacist my concern about being on Humira while COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire, and that I've been having some respiratory issues the last few days.

"Do you have a dry cough?" she asks calmly.

"No, there's definitely mucus in my system."

"Good. People who have coronavirus will experience a dry cough," she says smiling through the phone.

"That's the best news I've heard all day. Is there anything I can take for my fever and cough that won't be harmful to my health combined with the Humira medicine?"

"Sure, take Tylenol for your fever and Delsym for your cough. It should subside in a few days. You'll be perfectly fine." Her bed side manner is refreshing. I finish up our conversation and rush back to the party while deciding to cancel my appointment with my PCP tomorrow. My food has already arrived at the table and is getting cold. I barely touch it and am forced to take most of it home. Everyone asks where I've been, but I don't tell.

Before we leave, my teacher-moms hand me two Tylenol capsules and suggest I take some multi-vitamins to strengthen my immune system. I heed their advice and plan my next stop to Walgreens before I head home.

"And I don't wanna see you back until Wednesday or Thursday, okay?" they say, their motherly wisdom kicking in.

“Don’t worry about not having plans or anything. I gotchu. The kids will be just fine.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, half meaning it and half not. I don’t ever get sick and, even now, I’m fighting my mind’s capacity to admit it. I’ve never had the flu, strep throat, or anything greater than a small cough, but it usually goes away on its own. And I don’t waste my sick days on actually *being* sick. I use them for fun things like going on vacations and oversleeping.

By the time I arrive home with my Walgreens haul, I am physically drained. All I want is to rest my head on my fuzzy, purple pillow, but I still try my best to combat whatever sickness is taking over me. I’ve always been a fighter, so I take some more Tylenol, open up my laptop to grade more essays, and prepare my mind for work the next day. After all, my students need me.

By 5am the next day, I realize I’ve slept over ten hours, which is highly unusual for a six-hour-sleeper. I carefully type out a text to my department head informing her of my absence that day, and I text My assistant to write out the assignments for the students on my chalkboard. My fingers can barely lift my phone, my eyes are all watery and my heartbeat is still reaching for the stars, though, my fever has calmed down. I turn on the television and hear that more cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed in Virginia Beach while I fade in and out of sleep. That afternoon, I’ve slept most of the day and realize that I have five missed calls and my cell phone’s text messaging app is full.

“Drink some water, Nee,” my sisters text me.

“I’m praying for your healing. I’ll be over later tonight,” my mom says.

“Push fluids, boo. I hope you feel better soon,” My assistant texts.

“I miss your smiling face. Sending love your way,” from my teacher mom.

“Branch, don’t worry. Your classes are doing fine,” My assistant texts me.

“Ma, where are you?” Kennedy texts me. “I need to talk to you about something.” She is one of my favorites (because teachers do have those) and most needy student. I taught her my first year, first semester of 2018 and she hasn’t stopped coming back since. Everything about her is extra, though. She’s the only student I let call me “ma” because I know that is what she needs most of the time – someone to listen to her, give her some encouragement, laugh at her ridiculous stories, provide some discipline without being pushy, and tell her secrets to without feeling judged. Though, I know I can never replace her actual mother.

The next day I am feeling much better but decide to rest at home, mainly because of an email I receive from my superintendent demanding all staff to “stay home if you are feeling ill. You should not return to work until you are free of a fever for at least 24 hours without the use of fever-reducing medications.” The email is titled “Pandemic Plan.” *Wow, this coronavirus is getting more serious than I thought.* The superintendent’s never been as concerned about the staff’s health more than at this moment, but I take it as a divine opportunity to disinfect my home and catch up on *Stranger Things* via Netflix. I decided to wean myself off of the Tylenol and Delsym last night. I am not as concerned with proving or disproving any relationship with COVID-19 being that I haven’t visited any affected areas, around anyone who has, and I don’t have shortness of breath. I have stopped taking Tylenol at 6am this morning and my fever has broken completely by this evening. My heartrate is at about 54BPM and my cough isn’t as violent as it was Monday. I drink chamomile tea and lemon, rub some Vick’s vapor rub over my chest and under my nose (another remedy from my grandmother) and enter final essay grades from my desktop.

By Thursday, I am back in my classroom with a small and constant cough. But I feel my regular-self returning. At 7: 20am the tardy bell rings, and I use my planning block to sanitize

my classroom. *There's no telling what has been going on since I've been gone.* I use most of my Lysol wipes to clean all my classroom desks and tables. I finish that off by wiping them down again with the rest of my Fabuloso, mostly to add a nice scent in the air. I spray my Ben Q board, chalk boards and door handles with Lysol spray, put out more hand sanitizer on both of my tables, and open up a fresh box of tissues for the week. At 9am my first class arrives. I am teaching concepts that should have been taught three days ago with ease. And my students aren't giving me much fuss about the amount of notes or practice examples I've given them.

"Ms. Branch, where you been at?" one student asks me. "I heard you was sick." He's my most colorful student in language and demeanor.

"You got that 'Rona?'" he asks, raising one of his eyebrows. And the class erupts with laughter. Because it's the first class of my day, I can take his little snark remarks without too much frustration. Plus, he may be a challenging student, but he's one of my most intelligent. He uses the "class clown" persona to deflect from his peers knowing he's actually smart. I can honestly say that I like all of my students, especially the ones who give me issues. I learned early on that they're the ones who need me most.

"No, Marquis. Now have a seat so we can finish active and passive voice," I respond calmly while smiling. I usually don't laugh at his jokes but this time I'm impressed with his ingenuity. As a culture, black people have a way of shortening or renaming words to make it fit our style.

At the end of the day, I have redirected my students multiple times on the proper way to cover your cough and given them facts about what the coronavirus actually is, and is not. I've also had to tell all three of my classes that I am no longer sick, nor have I been affected or infected by the virus. During my last block of school, I get a phone call from the district and

answer via my Apple watch so all of my students can hear. It states that students will be out of school on Monday, March 16, 2020. Teachers and essential personnel will be present to plan for a potential school closing pending the spread of the pandemic.

“Do you really think the schools will be closed?” My assistant asks me after the robo message finishes. I am shocked by the measures the district is taking to curtail the spread of COVID-19 but “no, I don’t think they will close the schools and if they do, it won’t be for long.” I say this nonchalantly. It does not take much to close the school’s doors but something like this has never been a problem for the district or any district for that matter.

“Maybe Virginia Beach will be the first to close then the other school systems will follow,” My assistant reasons with me. And that’s typically how it goes with closures, one district will close due to flooding or snow or too much ice on the roads and the rest will fall like dominoes.

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. We’ll see.”

Friday comes and goes as quickly as the last one did. My students have worked hard yesterday so I tell them that today will be, “a catch-up day.” Mostly because they’re tired (me too) and everyone’s attention is on the pandemic happening around us. My cough is fully gone, and my heartbeat has been a steady 50-58 BPM all day.

“Whatever you did not get finished of the assignments from all week, do it today. And if you happen to be finished with everything, you can prepare for our new unit for next week which is the novel. Research five facts about George Orwell’s *1984* using your Chromebook and give me five scholastic sentences.” This is met with deep sighs and teeth being sucked. But I remind them that that’s their only assignment for the entire 90 minutes they’re in my classroom.

During my second block, Kennedy comes to see me and begins to tell me another story about her estranged mother. She barrels through my classroom door, makes her way to my desk ignoring the student already there receiving help, and slams her books down beside him.

“Kennedy, do you have a pass from your teacher?” I ask calmly. I’m used to her tantrums but I’m tired of constantly telling her to grow up. I can see that her face is red, as well as her eyes, and her NBA YoungBoy t-shirt is ruffled at the bottom as if she’s been using it to wipe her tears.

“And, you see that I am with a student right now. You owe him an apology.”

“Okay, dude, I’m sorry.” She barely opens her mouth. I hold out my hand to receive the pass but before I can verify the teacher’s signature, I receive a robo call from the district. *Two phone calls in less than 24 hours. What’s going on?* I play it aloud again, this time on my classroom Bluetooth speakers. After my students have quieted down, the message is clear: “Due to the rising pandemic, Governor Ralph Northam has closed all Virginia school districts for the next two weeks. On March 23, 2020 all students and staff are expected to return,” was all the students needed to know to shout for joy.

And, initially, I do too.

“Did you hear that all schools are closed until September??” I send a text to my group of teacher friends. It is the following Monday and the governor has made this unprecedented decision.

“Yas, won’t He do it!” My assistant responds. Another sends a GIF of an elderly church mother running laps around the pews signaling her thanks to God.

“How many times have we complained to each other that we need a break, that we’re overworked and underpaid, that we need time for self-care? Well, ladies, here it is.” Someone

sends a video to the group expressing her happiness about the news. What she says is all true, but I can't stop thinking about my students.

But what about my students?? I share via my Facebook timeline. In the two weeks that have passed since the closure, I have an array of emotions. All of which don't quite make sense. *None of this makes sense.* Kennedy texts me in a panic letting me know that her mom is sending her to stay with her grandmother because she's done something, but she won't say what. Marquis sends me multiple messages via google classroom stating he can't do his work because he "caught the 'Rona." Two of my other students, one of whom is expecting a baby in two weeks, sends me a text to ask can they be exempt from the mid-term exam. I have called all 65 of my students' parents and only have gotten in touch with 43 of them. I have met with my students via Zoom, but I don't feel like I've gotten in touch with them either. My department has met on Google Hangouts, but "hangin' out" ain't the same. The news reports say I should be practicing social distancing in hopes that things will return to normal soon. Deep down I know that's not true.

The Dance

I imagine my father to be something better than another statistic: absentee father, convicted felon, drunk, black man. And at my mother's 50th birthday party, I could finally see a small glimpse of who he wanted to be.

My mother's party was planned by my sisters and I and paid for by my sisters and I and anyone else who could spare cash for the venue, food, decorations, DJ, cake, photographer and everything else that goes into hosting a party of 135 people. In reality, we had been spending all extra money on the party for nine months so, to have the party finally get here felt like heaven. My father, though he played no intricate part in the party's coming together, he, at least, was there. It felt like my mother finally could live a normal life with a normal marriage. If only for show.

My father was released from prison five years prior to the party and had no significant job or income, after all what could a non-degree felon do for work? I sometimes resent him for that, but I know his reality is not only acute to him. I know there are many factors that keep him from finding a steady job. Keeping up with his parole officer gives him enough worry.

The night of the party came like any other. The southeastern coast of Virginia usually sees small flurries and high winds in mid-January; however, that seemed to miss us. Everyone dressed up in fancy Roaring 20's attire to my mother's wishes. My sisters were both dressed in black and silver gowns with matching flashy, feathery head pieces. The dress I purchased, both of my sisters dreamed of having; it was white, not pure white or cream colored but a sweet balance between the two, with black sequin going down the front, back and sides. The design I was not familiar with, but it looked close enough to elegant, 1920's. So I purchased it without the approval of my sisters. We had went shopping together in search of the perfect outfit; however,

the dress had only been in my size. One that, six months ago, I would not be able to fit into, thanks to a new diet and gym membership.

My mother, though, had two outfit changes for the night because that's what black women with high status. My mother doesn't have such status but for that night, she fashioned herself to be the most important person in the room. Her first dress was gold and flapper style with tiny beads at the bottom and the second was blush-colored with a large black belt but shorter than the other. They both had so much glitter that it was left behind after she hugged anyone. Her shoes complimented both her dresses, one being an open-toed, gold-glittery pair of high heels and the other, a wide toe, white pair of six-inch red bottoms. To complete the outfits, my sisters, mother and I *had* to get our make-up done. So we hired a makeup artist to beat our faces in the room of the Renaissance hotel right before the party began.

The birthday party was held in the ballroom of the Renaissance, decorated by my sister, Shyanne, because she always had a knack for party décor and hosting company. Everyone who wanted to help out with the decorations or picking up items from Part City, did so. And for the eight hours before the party began, we ran ourselves close to death to make sure the night felt perfect, at least for my mom. The DJ is given a list of music, but Shyanne switches it out at the last minute because the funky instrumentals didn't fit us the entire night. The photographer gave us a roaring 20s backdrop with matching props. And the dessert bar had white and black shimmer cake pops, candied apples with edible shimmer and tiny music notes on the top.

Everyone from my immediate family contributed to the party's well-being as much as they could. My aunts brought their smiles and affectionate expertise, my cousins brought their boyfriends, my uncles bought the booze, and my mother brought her true self. These glimpses of herself I see most when she is around her brothers, sisters, and close friends. It's like I see my

mother for the teenager she used to be. And my father is who he wishes to be – the husband and the father he never was.

My mother walks out late, of course, to “Feeling Good” by Nina Simone. I found the song quite fitting, not for the milestone birthday party or the 100+ friends and family that decided to be there for her, but that she finally got a second chance. My father is by her side the entire night and I know she loves that. Although he is drunk-crying by the end of it and has spilled his inner most life desires and regrets to my sisters and uncle and older cousin, sitting around a table after the party’s finished; I know my mother had appreciated the effort. She seemed happy for, well, for the first time in a long time.

As the night went on, people gave toasts and spoke highly of my mother. Tears were shed and arguments happened too. Family, who have not been together in a long time, always sees some kind of drama. But my mother is not privy to her sister-in-law and a wanna-be family friend fighting in the back by the bathrooms. In fact, I’m not even aware until after the party. The DJ’s music, cheesy family photos, and long conversations made sure of that.

“We got you on Live, too,” my sister tells me after I sit down from dancing with my dad. He, being courageous from the Hennessey, grabbed my hand to dance with him. Most of my mother’s family hails from New Jersey so, Jersey club music was what Shyanne had requested he play more of. My father had done an easy two-step and twirled me around a few times. It felt strange and comforting at the same time. He has never danced with me before nor twirled me around like a ballerina. But my fickle memory may be wrong. Maybe he had done so when I was a baby holding on to his arms or maybe he pretended I was on an airplane and swung me around mimicking the noises from the plane. Maybe he cared more for me back then but now, many years and too much hurt has separated us. Not, at least, for this night.

How to Smile

first, lift one cheek
 curve the sides of your mouth
 into a shape similar to the letter 'U'
 it may take time to get used to

IMPORTANT:

forget about self
 you means nothing
 deplete your fears
 you will grow the way you're meant
 don't suffocate something so beautiful

next, lift the opposite cheek
 show teeth
 make it believable

CAUTION:

no one else will trust it
 after all it can be infectious
 can cause an unruly amount of confidence
 subject to change if not rooted

then, raise your head
 back and let out a belly roar
 let go

BEWARE:

here's the turn
 there's magic in your glo
 you have all the right to end this now
 don't be fooled
 you get what you give
 and a lot of times not
 the wages of joy
 if you decide to proceed
 you must keep choosing it
 will be a puzzle
 preceded by potential and followed by purpose

finally, be ruthless and regal
 let your past know what it didn't steal
 show your future what to expect
 and repeat as often as you breathe

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