



Remedies for a Cavity
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Nothing about my grandma was soft. No way in hell that she could be. Aside from the cocoa butter slathered on her wrinkled skin and grease slicking back graying coils, she made sure that whoever she came across knew she was elbows right after a shower—rough.

She said that roughness started with the hands. When you are the only girl born into a family of eight boys, you got to know how to fight. Your knuckles start to learn victory eventually when you wrestle bodies twice your size. Those same knuckles that cracked at the seams when a woman's job meant cleaning the dishes and hand washing the clothes. Arthritis was in the tobacco she harvested while the summer heat made her a raisin in the sun.

When she strayed away from her parents, from personal rebellion or from death, (she never knew which came first), she broke like a dam and had my mother. She swore she won't gon be no traditional woman, laid up somewhere with a million kids to take care of. But what would a Black woman be without fastness, laying down with the first warm body that felt like love. Two rough people made nothing but a wrong. Papa was out there like a dog in heat running up the street with other women, but she had no desire to hold him on a leash.

“To hell with him.”

Maybe to hell he went on the night he laid on the couch and died. Over-indulged in what the Bible called a gift. My grandma was never one to cry but Ma said she spilled over like a second death. She was more grief than she was a body. She

couldn't love nobody while they were alive. There was no permanence in that. Ma couldn't even remember the last time my grandma had said "I love you" to anyone, so much so, that Ma couldn't even say "I love you" to me.

Ma was her only child. She took back after Papa so much that she felt haunted by the dead. She didn't know whether to resent her daughter or to bring her close. He left her here alone with nothing but his child as a memory. She regrets letting him get away. She reckoned she should've weaned him off his ho's and sexed away the alcoholism. Yet being a loyal woman won't enough to keep a man around—let alone alive.

She tried to imitate what her own parents did. Tough love and even tougher beatings. The branches off the trees were only motivation for Ma to be driven away. She was born to be wild, big head ripping through the canal to mark her passage of life. Papa was dead before she was five and my grandma was convinced he was living through their only daughter. Smoking weed with the girls she called friends and getting drunk with the boys who could pay to spare her a little attention.

Ma severed connections in the way that you killed a snake, head first. She didn't care who stuck around to see that she was building her own casket. You live so much for others that you realized death is the only thing that you have for yourself.

Ma was barely out of high school when she severed her connection with me. She moved in with the first enabler she could get her hands on and realized she was not fit for a baby. Knocked

on my grandma's door and was down the road before she could realize a baby was on the porch. She had no way in getting in contact with Ma, didn't even know where she was staying. My grandma knew that she was going to hell for a lot of things, but it won't gon be because she sent her own granddaughter away.

So she kept me. Out of love or by force I'd never know. She couldn't stop working at the dry cleaners if she wanted to keep me out of the hands of the CPS. Yet, the daycare abuse hysteria of the 80s terrified her. She won't leaving a child somewhere to get raped. She left behind Ma and what was left of her family in Virginia to settle in Edenton, a small waterfront town in North Carolina. People came from everywhere just to retire here, and it was quiet enough to make her feel sane.

The Blacks and Whites made it their point to separate themselves. Yet my grandma figured it was better to be a coon to the neighbors in silence. She couldn't stay to herself forever and the need for a community was coming down fast. She did what any other person in a boring southern town would do: Find a church.

There I was, overwhelmed by the stench of moth balls for five days a week in what attempted to be a daycare center in the basement. I tried to make sense of Bible quotes painted on the wall, but cared more about the illustration of Noah's Ark and all its animals instead. All I needed to know was that Jesus loved me. I think they were scared of kids that knew anything else.

I thought that my days of church would be over by the time I started school. By this time, my grandma had took to church

for salvation. She emphasized the importance of presenting my sins and asking the Lord for forgiveness. I didn't know what I needed forgiveness for. I had smashed a few bugs and lied a couple times. Maybe it was more for her than it was for me, but I think she knew the weight of my sins before I did. Had I known what I know now, I wish she would've saved me.

She said it was the best time to start school because they had long been integrated. But there was still this imaginary line. I had never interacted with a White person in my life. All I could do was catch their eyes and quickly look away. I could barely open my mouth to talk to my own folks. Grandmother thought I was selectively mute but I was just used to having others communicating my needs for me. I didn't have half of Ma's rage, and for that, she could at least be relieved. I did pretty well in school. I liked when my White teachers thought that I did good. Cause when you ain't got their approval, you can't bet on having anything else. I talked a little bit more, but only when spoken to. My grandma never said that she was proud of me, but she made sure to thumbtack every award I'd ever gotten to the walls for the whole world to see. The whole world was only us, but it meant everything to me.

I appreciated church more as I grew out of the old moth ball basement. I had read that same Bible verse enough to commit it to memory. I underlined it in the copy we kept at home. My

grandma finally considered me old enough to join the commotion upstairs. There were no illustrations or verses. Just God staring down from his throne of mosaic windows. Church gave me an extended family that I didn't have to share blood with. The lady who dressed like a peacock with her feathered hats and bright suits always had a peppermint waiting for me in her purse. An elderly man with a few missing teeth slipped me a five whenever I brought him my report card. It made the hot mornings in itchy stockings more bearable. I barely paid attention to the sermon anyways. I was back at square one of everything becoming incomprehensible. All I needed to know was that Jesus loved me. I was afraid of knowing anything else.

The softest I had seen her hands was when she was down on her knees praying. We made it a habit to pray every night before she sent me off to bed. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to see her reading the Bible at the kitchen table. Glasses perched on her nose, pens and highlighters all over the table. She spoke to herself, but it was too quiet for me to hear. She prayed for basic things, like good health and fed mouths. I couldn't help but think that she was praying for something else.

It was high school and the both of us were getting older. I think I prayed for her to live more than she did. I refused to listen when she said something along the lines of "When I'm dead and gone." It was like she was ready to go. She talked like there would be people who loved me once she left. Ma sent a card every August on my birthday with whatever money she could scrounge up. I only

ever seen her in pictures and my grandma took to saying nothing when I asked if she could come down from Virginia and have dinner someday. I think my grandma would kill her if she ever came back to this place. I wasn't angry with Ma, but I felt like I had to be. I couldn't separate my grandma's feelings from my own.

High school was all hormones and practical jokes. Won't no need for thoughts of the future when you couldn't afford one no ways. Couldn't focus on no future when the one right in front of me insisted on burying herself. I wasn't smart like I was back then. B+ and a few C's here and there. The grades didn't matter as much when I rushed off the bus to check that she was still there. Them same old awards were thumbtacked in the kitchen. Maybe she knew those would be the last time I'd ever bring some home. I'd crumple my report card and tell her that it hadn't been sent out yet. She couldn't know how hurt she was making me.

Adults couldn't be your friend as much as you wanted them to be. I had to poke my nose out of grown folks business and find friends my own age. But what did age matter when I had to be an adult my entire life? Having friends my age meant that nobody was dying anytime soon, and maybe that's what I needed. I followed behind girls who ate my compliments up like properly salted collards on a Sunday night. All you had to do was say you liked someone's perm or ask them where they got their jeans from for them to take you under their wing. None of them could barely remember my name, but I didn't mind. Their lives were more interesting. Siblings and gossip and being on the step team. Picking

out the cutest boys and giggling over who would lose their virginity first. I giggled with them. But somehow I knew, we won't laughing at the same thing.

After a while, it got boring. There were only so many people in this town before they became one in the same. None of them had personalities that I ain't already seen. Remembering my name was the least of my issues as I spoke to my friends less and less. Some of my church uncles and aunties died. Death had found its way to my door once again. My grandma could see the look on my face and told me to pray about it. I had run out of things to say to God. He won't offering no solutions anyway. I don't think he ever did. God probably didn't believe in his own work enough to be listening to me.

She was all greased and polished. Not a scar on her knees. I wondered if she had even had a childhood to have been walking around scratch free like that. Dark skin underneath a white dress, she gleamed. I had barely looked at her face before I had decided to follow her to the bathroom. I trailed behind slowly, hoping to make the impression that I just so happened to need the bathroom too. I didn't have to actually pee, so I pretended to smooth out what the hot comb couldn't tame until she came out. I have never wanted to talk more in my life.

“I like your dress.”

She cracked a gapped smile, turning on the faucet to wash

her hands.

“Thank you. My momma made it. She’s-uh seamstress. Where did you get yours? I like the color.”

I felt that she was lying out of politeness. There was no emphasis in her voice that could tell me otherwise. Yet, I reckon you can only get so much from a voice that favoured molasses—low and sweet—slow and sweet.

“Does your mama own that dress shop downtown? I love walking by and just staring through the window.” I responded, completely ignoring her last question out of embarrassment.

“Yep! That’s the one. I mighta seen you. I practically live in the shop. I’m tryna learn how to sew so I can carry on the business one day. What’s your name?” She shook her hands to dry.

“Lavonne.”

“I’m Kimberly.”

“I wish my Ma gave me a White name.”

“You think I have a White name?”

I rocked my hands back and forth. “A little bit.”

She snorted. I was at least relieved she didn’t take it the wrong way. Before I could ask her if we went to the same school, another churchgoer walked into the bathroom.

“Well, I better go back. My momma is probably wondering what’s taking so long. I’ll be here next Sunday though. We’re new to the church, but I think my momma likes it enough to stay. Maybe I’ll see you then?”

“I’ll be here next Sunday. Um, I’m actually headin’ out

too.”

She held the door open for me and we trailed down the hallway together, the smell of baby oil hitting my nose. I felt the need to say something else as we walked shoulder to shoulder.

“See you later, Lavonne!”

All I could do was wave as she bounced back to her seat at the pew.

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“I see you made a friend.” My grandma’s back was to me as she finished up the last of the dishes.

I chewed on the eraser of a pencil as I sat doing homework. “I wouldn’t say we friends yet, but she seemed really nice.”

“You know her from school?”

“I ain’t never seen her around.

“Y’all looked to be around the same age.” “She isn’t in any of my classes.”

“Well, I made a friend too.”

I looked up at her as she dried off her hands. She clutched her robe around her as she pulled out a chair from under the kitchen table. I didn’t think she knew what a friend was. But I guess I didn’t know either.

“Name’s Yvette. She’s been going to our church for about a month now and we’ve spoken a couple times before. Real nice lady.”

“Oh. Is she your age?”

“A year younga actually. Retired early. Bakes cakes and pies for folks. Couple of kids and grandkids. God knows I’m ready for my retirement. These bones ain’t getting any younger. Need to gone and get me a wrist brace now.”

“She sound nice. This girl’s name is Kimberly. Her Ma own that dress shop downtown. Remember when we used to just stare through the window and I’d beg for you to buy me one of em?”

“Yep. And you knew damn well I couldn’t afford it.”

We both cracked a laugh that made me feel like we were both young in the moment. Like I wasn’t worried about all the regrets my grandma had never told me. I stared into eyes that didn’t remind me of a casket. They shined, oh how they shined.

“Anyway, I think this will be good for you. You don’t need to be so shy all the time, child. You almost grown and I don’t think I’ve eva seen you hold a full conversation with somebody that ain’t me.”

“I ain’t seen you hold a full conversation with no one either.”

“Now don’t get smart. Gon in there and bathe and get ready for bed now. It’s already late. Make sure to pray. Tell Him what you worried about and always, always ask for forgiveness. God the only one that can save you from your sins.”

“Yes m’am.”

Won’t no need for forgiveness. Ain’t killed nobody. Won’t drinking. Refused to spread my legs. I don’t think lying even counts.

Why did I need God's forgiveness? There won't no worries that he ain't already heard. I bathed, thinking of what I could ask for in exchange for my sins.

I didn't pray that night. I wondered if Kimberly ever felt the same way. That praying was pointless when your God did not talk back. She probably ain't have nothing to pray about either. No girl that walked the earth with her knees unskinned needed a life worth forgiving.

I looked for her at school the next morning. Everybody had to grow up with the same people. There was only one elementary, one middle, and one high school after they shut down all the Black schools. When I didn't see her in my classes, I looked around the hallways. She was taller than most girls I knew. Maybe she didn't come to school that day. I imagined that she always wore something beautiful. Something that nobody else had.

"I need you to sweep the floor, dust the furniture, and set the table." was all I was greeted with after stepping through the door. The overhead fan buzzed above the oven as steam boiled out of the pot. I dropped my bag in my room before making my way into the kitchen.

"Somebody coming over?" I asked, staring at all the spices and ingredients sprawled over the counter.

"Mhm. Ms.Yvette. Now gon and do what I told you." She didn't even turn to look at me as she shooed me away. I sneezed over the feather duster, gliding it over the coffee table, lamps, and shelves. The couch was covered in plastic. She said she had it

before Ma was born. There was a point where she wouldn't let me sit on it. She said she'd leave it in her will for me. I'm scared it won't last once I get it. I'm scared nothing will last once she leaves me.

I had just finished spreading a cloth over the table when a knock could be heard at the door. My grandma never dressed nice unless it was for church. She stood dainty in black trousers and a dark green button up tucked in. She hated wearing anything that won't her house slippers or orthopedic shoes, but here she was squeezing her feet into some flats. Jewellery I didn't even know she owned popping up out of nowhere. It made me embarrassed to be dressed the way I was. Yvette was rich in Blackness. I don't think I had ever seen someone in a hue so blue. She clutched a huge pocketbook to an orange pantsuit. Coils were short and textured. She carried something in a pie pan, hidden by tinfoil.

“Oh it's so nice to see you, Yvette. You didn't have to bring no dessert. I need to watch my figure anyways.”

“It's quite alright! I wanted to bring a little gift as a thank you. Is this your grandbaby?”

“Yep. The only one God has blessed me with. Lavonne, why don't you take Ms.Yvette's pie and put it in the fridgerator.”

“Yes m'am.”

I took the pie from her hands as she beamed. One of her teeth were encased in gold.

“She just the pretty. Takes back after you, Pearl, and polite too. If my grandkids had half the respect you did, things would go

a lot more smoothly.”

I had never given much thought to my looks. I spent so much time admiring other girls that I didn’t want to access my own. All developed and defined. I had waited all my life to catch up, but I reckoned I’d be all ribcage and flatchested forever. I took the pie and set it in our nearly bare fridge. Green beans, fried chicken and cornbread sat on the counter.

“Here, let me take your jacket. All that cooking make it warm in here.” My grandma insisted.

“Thank you! It’s a nice place you got in here.”

“I try my best.”

We washed our hands in the kitchen sink and prepared to dig in. I set paper plates and cups down while my grandma fetched the sweet tea. She placed food on everyone's plate, making sure to give Yvette the biggest portions.

“Let us pray.” My grandma began.

We bowed our heads and joined hands. I couldn’t help but peek my eyes open every few seconds as the prayer started. Yvette sat rubbing my grandma’s hand. I closed my eyes back shut by the time we said “Amen.” They talked back and forth, mostly small. I watched my grandma turn into a storyteller within an hour. Stories about her youth in Virginia and paving the way for the life she lived now. Yvette was in Edenton for the retirement too. Moved down from Baltimore. I couldn’t imagine leaving behind somewhere so eventful, for a place so lifeless. I wanted to live in the city one day, but with what money to get me there?

“Mm. Mm. Mm. You salted them greens to perfection, Pearl. Makes me miss my Mama’s cookin.” Yvette sighed in satisfaction while cleaning the chicken grease from her hands.

“Well, I appreciate it. Took me years to get it right.” She dipped her chin down, brushing crumbs off herself as a way to deflect from the compliment. She rose and started to collect the trash for disposal.

“Can I help you with the dishes?” She offered.

“Oh no, it’s quite alright. Dish washing is like second nature for me. Find it therapeutic, you know.”

“Nonsense! You allowed me to be a guest in your home. It’s only right that I help you clean it back up. I’ll clean the pots and pans up and how about you just towel them off for once?”

“If you insist, Yvette.”

My grandma stood twisting her cross necklace as she watched Yvette run the dish water. That same shine from yesterday was in her eyes again, taking in Yvette’s kindness. She broke from her trance and joined her at the sink, shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow. Nothing but pots clinking together to fill a comfortable silence. I took this as a sign to leave. Partly to start my homework and mostly because they deserved to be left alone. I think this new friend thing was as good for my grandma as it could possibly be for me. I had nothing to contribute to their conversations anyway.

I was maybe quarter way through by the time Yvette had peeked her head into my bedroom, hands pruned from all that time spent under the water.

“I’m about to cut the pie if you want some, baby. It’s fudge. Everybody usually loves chocolate.”

I did, so I followed behind her to the kitchen. My grandma sat on the couch waiting patiently for a piece. It was weird seeing her not wanting to take charge of everything. She didn’t like to wait on other folks if she could do it twice as fast. Yet, for Yvette she waited. And I couldn’t think why.

“Here you go, Suge. I hope you like it.” She gave me her gold toothy smile again.

“Thank you.”

“And help yourself all you want! I’m leaving this here for y’all to share.”

She passed by me to carry a plate into the living room. I cut in mines while still standing, eager to taste it. I always had a sweet tooth. It was crisp on top while chocolate lay melted in between. I already wanted another slice before finishing the one I had. I walked toward the living room, wanting to tell Yvette how good her pie was. They both sat cross-legged, illuminated by the tableside lamp. Yvette persuaded my grandma to have a piece of her pie. Wedging it between the fork, Yvette carried it over to my grandma’s mouth. There was no protest, just hesitation before she opened it. I felt like I had invaded someone’s privacy for no reason at all, but they had already seen me before I could backtrack on my heels.

“Um, Ms.Yvette, I really loved your pie.” I turned to my grandma. “Can I have another slice?”

She toyed with her necklace again, looking at me as if she had only heard half of what I said. “Gon head. This yo last slice before bed.”

I nodded and retreated back into the kitchen. Hell must've froze over. I had never seen her so content, so willing to accept the help of someone else. It was the type of satisfaction she couldn't get from her kin, let alone somewhere else. I didn't understand it. Didn't understand her. But I think I was starting to realize that it wasn't my responsibility to understand.

I stayed in the kitchen, even when my second slice was long gone. It was 8 PM when Yvette finally decided that she needed to go home.

“Lavonne, come tell Ms.Yvette goodbye.”

I trailed back into the living room where she was helping Yvette slide on her jacket.

“Bye, Ms.Yvette.” I forced a smile. 20

“Bye, baby. Y'all take care now. Thank you so much, Pearl for having me over. It was a pleasure.” She gave my grandma's hand a squeeze before stepping out onto the porch.

“You drive safe now.” She responded.

She stood on the porch until Yvette pulled away. Opening the screen door, she looked directly into my eyes.

“You go on and bathe now. Pray like I've been telling you.”

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The next few weeks at church were interesting. She gave more testimonies than she ever did before. I had actually seen her

shed real tears. Something I thought she was incapable of. The most interesting thing though was that she seemed to avoid Yvette at church. As soon as she saw Yvette headed her way, she haultailed both of us out the exit. If she couldn't avoid her in time, she made up some excuse to cut their conversation short. I couldn't focus on her life though. Not when I was focusing on the one I could call my own.

Like my grandma had hoped, Kimberly and I did become friends. She was homeschooled which explained why I could never find her anywhere. We had some in common, like being the only child and fans of Janet Jackson. We slipped away to the bathroom when the heat and praise of the church got to be too much. We had our own little spot. I hadn't felt this special in church since I was finally old enough to come upstairs. The Sunday's weren't enough for me. I savored every piece of herself that she gave me until we could meet again in the next week. It stayed like this until she asked me "You wanna spinnanight at my house next weekend?"

"Can I?" I could feel the morning grogginess disappearing.

"If you want to and if your Grandma is okay with it! My parents would like to formally meet you, although they like you already. I hate that we can only have good conversations inside this moldy ol bathroom."

I smiled, looking down at my shoes. "Okay, okay. Can you pick me up if she says yes? I feel bad asking her to drive."

"I can have my momma pick you up Friday evening after she closes up shop if that's okay with you."

“I appreciate it.”

“Of course, girl. Anything you need, just ask.”

I had the urge to reach out and squeeze her hand like Yvette had did with my grandma several weeks ago as we walked back. I wanted to show my appreciation for taking me under her wing, even though it was probably more than that. Kimberly seemed genuine. She remembered my name and included me without me having to ask. I almost wanted to ask if she was pulling my leg sometimes. Maybe I feared what had happened to my grandma would happen to me. Kimberly would be in line with the bastardly papas of the world that left to figure out what went wrong in their absence. I wanted my grandma to be so desperately wrong. That not everyone would be out to get you.

My grandma was fanning herself when I sat down, surrounded by the many “Thank you Jesus” and “Amen’s” of the people packed next to her. I glanced at Kimberly who was across the room. She nodded forward, hoping to give me a look of reassurance. I leaned toward my grandma’s ear, fearing she wouldn’t hear me when I asked the first time.

“Can I spinnanight at Kimberly’s house this weekend? Her Ma offered to pick me up.”

“I need to talk to her folks first before I just send you over there.”

I figured that would be the response. I had never stepped foot in someone’s house without my grandma’s supervision. I knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but I didn’t want to disappoint Kimberly by

telling her that I probably wasn't able to go. I wanted to try. Hell, beg. I'd do anything to be besides Kimberly outside of a church. There had to be more for us out there than seeking sanctuary in a public bathroom. I would like to think that Kimberly would want it that way too.

As church began to wrap up, all heat and hugs and catching up, Kimberly and I gravitated towards each other. Seeing her parents made me realize how split down the middle she was. Doe-eyed and dark like her mother. Flat nose and full lips like her father. They grinned at me as I met her halfway, my grandma right behind.

"Lavonne! It is so nice to finally meet you. You can call me Dinah, and this is my husband Booker." Her mother had that same gap that seemed to hold love in between.

"It's a pleasure." Her father followed, offering up his hand to shake.

"It's nice to meet you both. My grandma would like to meet you both if that's alright."

"Of course, honey! We want to assure her that you're in good care." Her mother responded.

I looked over at Kimberly and she crossed her fingers. We mimicked each other, rocking back and forth on our feet and picking at our fingernails as they made conversation. I wanted to be as hopeful as Kimberly when it came to how life played out. I had faith that she wouldn't lose interest in being friends if my grandma said no, but I didn't want the reality to play out where I needed the

faith in the first place. When my grandma turned to me and finally agreed, I had no idea what to do. She unlatched me from the leash. What was a loose dog to do on their first day?

“You got enough draws and clothes packed?” My grandma asked, walking into my room.

“Grandma, it’s only two days.” I sighed.

“Well, a lot can happen in two days.”

I threw in an extra pair of draws just to make her happy. I tried to think of what I missed while she presented me with a toothbrush holder.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t forget to grab that little cake I bought at the store. Ain’t homemade, but I didn’t want to send you off without anything to bring them.”

I nodded. Everything buzzed. My mind, my hands, my stomach. I wasn’t concerned with first impressions because we had already gotten past that. There was a lot that could happen in two days.

Kimberly’s momma pulled up around 6:30. Kimberly waved at me from the backseat and I suddenly felt light despite the cake in my hands and the bag on my shoulders. Kimberly opened the door and took the cake from my hands. “Feel free to place your bag in the front, sweetie.” Her momma patted the seat next to her. I made my way round to do as she said, although I knew it was

more of a suggestion rather than a demand. She rolled down the window and waved out to my grandma.

“She’s safe with me, Ms.Pearl! I just know the girls will have a great time!”

My grandma stood duck-foot on the porch, hands on her hips. I couldn’t read her expression and it worried me. “I’m sure of it. Let me know if Lavonne causes any trouble!”

My face prickled. Eighteen and eight looked the same to my grandma as far as discipline was concerned. I opened the door to join Kimberly in the back. She grinned once again, the cake sitting in her lap. The late summer heat created beads on her forehead. I hated getting dark in the summer but she made it seem so pretty. She had red nails laced around the container and I suddenly wanted my nails painted too. I wanted the ribbons in my hair and the collarbones that stuck from beneath my tank top. I wanted long legs that would carry me places faster.

“Oh, I can have the cake back now.”

“It’s okay. Why don’t you take a break, Lavonne?”

I didn’t have a rebuttal for that, so I let her have her way.

Being with Kimberly was enough of a break in itself. For two days I was leaving behind a life where my jaw could not unclench. I had been biting on a tongue so numb that I could not recognize when it was sore.

Their house was no bigger than mine, and in a way, it was comforting. One story robin blue with flower pots sitting on the windows. A swing was attached to a tree in the yard. A chipping

bird bath ran dry. I grabbed my bag and walked toward Kimberly who was waiting for me.

“You got a pretty house.” I said, squinting my eyes in face of the sun.

“Thank you. My daddy painted it all up and my mom loves gardening.”

“What does your daddy do?”

“Oh, he’s an accountant. He say he lucky to be sittin’ up there with them White folks making the same pay they do. What does your grandma do?”

“Dry cleans laundry.”

“I needed her a long time ago with the number of times I’ve stained clothes.”

Kimberly made it hard to be ashamed. I hurried up the steps so that I could hold the screen door open for her. Their house was as cheerful as it was outside. Framed pictures all over the walls. The television blaring. Trinkets of all sorts covering the lamp and coffee table. There was something boiling on the stove as Kimberly’s daddy greeted his wife with a kiss. Kimberly sat the cake on the table and accepted the forehead kiss from him too. I stood by the door, overcome with awkwardness and curiosity. I think my Ma and Pa could have been the same way had my Grandma and Papa got it together. All that roughness had to put itself somewhere. And that somewhere seemed to be the bloodstream.

“Come on, Lavonne. You can put your stuff in my room and get ready for supper.” Kimberly instructed.

I followed her down a carpeted hallway, her perfumed room leaking into it. I felt jittery, being in a place where I could talk to Kimberly that wasn't the bathroom. I missed having a churchgoer that walked in. It gave me a reason to shut up before saying something embarrassin'. I didn't understand why I was afraid. Kimberly was the type of person who made anything that came out your mouth sound normal. I could've told her I killed a man and she would have reassured me that I didn't.

She had the room I dreamed of. TLC, Destiny's Child, and the Spice Girls posters plastered all over the wall. Magazines and books that weren't the bible or equivalent. A push-button telephone on her nightstand. Lilac bedspread with matching curtains. The type of girliness I would expect from her. I dropped my bag next to her drawer as she kicked her shoes off.

"I hope it's not too messy. I tried to straighten it up a bit before you got over here." She started, her brows furrowing.

"It looks fine to me. You a fan of TLC?"

"Girl, I don't know anyone who isn't."

"You don't even go to real school, so how would you know what anyone likes?"

She rolled her eyes and stuck out her tongue at me. I laughed and proceeded to kick off my shoes too. We walked back to the kitchen where her parents were already sitting. There were bowls of mashed potatoes, rolls, and pork chop on the table. Their eyes lit up around the same time as I approached a seat.

"It is so nice to finally welcome you to our home,

Lavonne. Kimberly has been talking our head off about you since you've met." Her momma beamed, clasping her hands together.

"Let us know how we can make this visit more comfortable for you, Lavonne. And feel free to eat as much as you want. I made more than enough for seconds." Her daddy followed.

"And thank you so, so much for that lemon cake you brought. It'll be the perfect treat after supper." Her momma added.

"Momma, you're embarrassing me!" Kimberly shook her head, eyes downward as she took her place at the table.

All I could do was smile and nod. I was more focused on the thought of Kimberly talking about me as I pulled my seat from under the table. I wondered what she said, and how she could have so much to talk about. I had a place in her mind.

"Are you excited to be graduating this year, Lavonne?" Her momma asked.

I finished up my last piece of porkchop and wiped at my mouth. "Yes, m'am I am. I thought school would never come to an end."

"What are you plans after high school?" Her daddy jumped in.

My face burned. I didn't want to tell them how I had planned to work at the dry cleaners too. "Um, I'm not sure. I haven't given much thought to it. I'm just taking it one day at a time I guess."

"I'm sure Kimberly has told you all about how she's taking over my dress shop one day." She flickered her eyes over to her

daughter, hoping that she would say something.

“Yes, m’am she has. Me and my grandma love passing by your shop. You’re very talented.”

“Well, aren’t you a sweetheart?” she got up from her seat. “And I’m sure this cake will be just as sweet.

I had one slice of cake before asking if I could wash up. As much as I appreciated her parent’s politeness, I was afraid they would begin asking questions I didn’t have the answers for. I think pity was the worst emotion God ever made because it helped nobody. Besides, plenty of kids lived with their grandparents and I didn’t want them thinking my parent’s absence was evidence that they were horrible people. I could not judge those who weren’t here to defend themselves.

I trudged from the shower, smelling of shea butter from the soap her momma gave me. Kimberly was sitting on her bed, a spot next to her where I would fit. I stuffed my dirty clothes in my bed, eager to sit beside her.

“You okay?” She nudged my shoulder, our bare knees resting on one another’s.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. I’m just really shy when it comes to talking to new people.” I responded.

“Sometimes my parents don’t realize when they’re being nosy. I could tell you were uncomfortable.”

“It’s no biggie. I know they had good intentions.”

“Have you ever felt that I was nosy?”

I looked her in the eyes and laughed. “No. I’ve never told

you anything that I didn't want you to know. Which isn't a lot." I paused. "I just...I don't know. I panic when I realize I'm going to be working at the dry cleaners for the rest of my life. And it shouldn't be embarrassin' because I'm not embarrassed of my grandma.

"There isn't anything wrong with the dry cleaners but I understand you don't want to live off of it forever. I feel the same way about my Momma's shop. It'll be good money because Black and White folk alike are always lined up to take what's on the rack. But I've always had dreams of being a nurse. I love taking care of people. Always told my momma and daddy they wouldn't need no nursing home with me around. But it takes a lot of paperwork when you homeschooled. Plus, I don't wanna disappoint my momma."

"I don't think you could ever disappoint her, Kimberly."

"Lavonne," she touched my hand and I could feel my heart in my throat. "Do you ever miss yours?"

I didn't want her to see that I was dazed, so I rolled my eyes and scoffed.

"I thought you said you weren't going to be nosy."

"I'm sorry, I-"

"I'm pulling your leg." I let out a big breath and focused on anything except her. "I do miss my ma sometimes. I've seen her in pictures and I don't believe she's half the things my grandma told me she was. Or maybe, I just don't want to believe to save myself the trouble of figuring it out. My grandma got a right to be angry though. She didn't ask to raise a child when she was barely

fendin' for herself. I want to make amends with her, but my grandma has never let me. My grandma wants me to be angry at her too. But if I'm going to hate somebody, I want to hate them for my own reasons. If I walked around carryin' everybody else's anger, I couldn't tell what was my own. And I can't carry her anger much longer, Kimberly. I just can't. I don't wanna be left with all that anger when she die."

I trembled with the fear that I had said too much. There was too much silence to confirm that I did. I should've stopped after that first sentence. If I didn't say it to Kimberly though, who else would I say it to? God had disconnected our phone line. The static popped in my ears. I wanted her to say something, and yet, it'd be better if she said nothing at all. Pity was not changing my grandma's mind or bringing my Ma back to the doorsteps. If anything, I needed to say it out loud to myself. To know that it was real; to know that I had felt it.

She engulfed me in a hug and I felt my bones go rigid. The concept felt foreign to me. There was no need to be on such high alert but my brain was a alarm system, whirring and whirring until I fled from the danger at hand.

"Do hugs make you uncomfortable?" She pulled back.

"Oh, no." Knowing good and well I was lyin'. "It just took me by surprise is all."

"I know everybody ain't as lovey dovey as me so I wanted to make sure."

"Well, I can only imagine how much energy that took up

for you to tell me. Again, I'm sorry if I was being nosy. We don't have to talk about anything else. But I appreciate you for trusting me to know. I'm sorry about my parents. We can lay down now if you're feeling tired."

"It's okay. I promise you weren't nosy. I appreciate you caring about me. I wouldn't trust my secrets with anyone else. I'm tired if you're tired."

"Okay." She reached over and turned on her lamp before getting up to close the door. I ran my eyes over her silhouette as she flicked off the lights. For a moment, it felt like this was our house. Maybe we had traveled tens years to a future where we owned the shop together and she was finally coming home to me for the night. I imagined that living with Kimberly would be peaceful. I felt flushed as the bed creaked beside me. We were facing each other. I wanted to say "Goodnight," but my mouth was reaching for other words. She seemed to be waiting for me to say something, but nothing good would come out of this broken silence.

"What?" Kimberly breathed.

I scrambled for something to say. "My tooth hurts." And it did.

"Probably because you been clenching that jaw since you've been here." She reached out and touched my visible cheek.

"Relax."

Whirring. Whirring.

"If it hurts real bad, we got some Orajel in the medicine

cabinet.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I felt like an asthmatic dog searching for a breath to catch. “I think that would help.”

She removed her hand from my cheek and we both got up. I half regretted it. Something was wrong with me, but wasn't there always? I felt like a dress that Kimberly was ripping the seams out of. She would be able to recite my own story better than I could if our friendship lasted. I didn't know if I wanted to be undone, but I had no will to stop it. I waited as she fumbled around in the cabinet. Before I could tell her that I'd actually wait it out, she found what she was looking for.

“Which tooth is it?” She talked quietly, as if it was bad for the whole household to overhear that I had a toothache.

I wanted her to have her way this time. I point to the very last molar on the right side. I watched as she washed her hands, careful to wash them for at least twenty seconds. She twisted the cap off the Orajel. I felt for a cross necklace that was not there. For a moment, I was my grandma, whose eyes could not focus on what was in front of her. Here I was, mouth wide for a forgiveness that would not come. How could I stomach all my prayers as she slid a finger over the throbbing, when it had been proof that God had been listening all along? I understood now, why Yvette and my grandma were all hands and pie and dishes.

She told me relief would come in thirty minutes, but the relief I wanted was short of what a dentist could fix.

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