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## Hurts Like Love

Lisa Nichel Magee

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Hurts Like Love

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Lisa Magee

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024



This is dedicated to all the late bloomers. It's not too late.

Thank you to everyone who supported me on this journey. You made this possible.

xo

*Friends*

*How many of us have them?*

*Friends*

*Ones we can depend on*

*-Whodini*

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## **Introduction**

Although they are inventions, I've gotten to know and grown to care for these characters over the past year as if they were true friends. I have laughed with them and cried with them as they navigated the messiness of life and love. My hope is that they and their stories will resonate with you in the same way.

## The Secret

She couldn't cry. Not yet. Marta was numb. She stared at the two thick blue lines emblazoned on the white strip. This wasn't the miracle she had prayed for. What the fuck was she going to do?

First she rinsed the pee stick and jammed it in her pocket. Then gathered the rest of the evidence, stuffing it in a plastic bag that she put into her backpack. On second thought, she took it out to the hallway trash shoot. She couldn't leave a single clue.

Marta didn't want anyone to find out, least of all her parents. Jaron didn't even know that the two of them might be in trouble. She hadn't confided in her best friend Amina or her cousin Sonya and she usually told them everything. This time she couldn't. She thought if she didn't say it out loud then it wouldn't be true. But that didn't work. Marta felt the most alone she ever had.

She thought about taking care of it herself like a woman in a movie she had seen. All she had to do was make an appointment. She was old enough and didn't need parental consent. As long as she paid cash and nothing went wrong, nobody would ever know. It could stay her secret.

But she didn't know if she could keep that kind of secret forever. It hadn't worked out for the woman in the movie.

Marta laughed thinking of that cheesy movie. Then she burst into tears. She knew she had to tell Jaron. There was no way around it. Just like she had to tell Sonya and Amina, her grand council. They would call her out, "I knew you was acting funny!"

“Told you!” Jaron would be hurt, “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. We’re in this together, right?” Right. Until we're not.

Her mother would love it if he took off. She never liked Jaron because she went to school with his daddy, Big J, and she never liked him. “Just like his daddy. Too cute. Think he the slickest thing since ice cream.” Marta wished that she was sure Jaron would prove her mother wrong.

Marta was surprised the first time that Jaron asked her out. He could go out with practically anyone he wanted. She knew she was a cutie pie herself but guys like that usually dated the plastics. And he had. His ex, Missy Simmons, had tried to start shit with her but Marta put a quick end to that.

Jaron never pressured Marta to have sex. It was Marta who pounced on him. They were alone at Jaron’s and she went for it. She was surprised that he hadn’t tried anything before. That first time was not rockets and fireworks. It was silly and awkward, the best part being when they gave up trying to be sexy and just laughed and cuddled. Marta was afraid her parents would find out if she got on birth control. She depended on Jaron to always have condoms. They were good about using protection. Most of the time. They both had plans for the future they didn’t want to derail.

Marta thought about calling Amina and Sonya on a three-way. One of them would probably call her soon anyway. Her girls would support her no matter what. Amina had dealt with the same situation already so she would be helpful with info. Sonya, being her cousin and a little older, could offer insight on how to deal with the family. A favored niece, she could even be there when Marta told her mom, if it came to

that. They would both have ideas about what she should say to Jaron. They liked him but tended not to trust males in general, especially Amina. Marta didn't know what she wanted to do and feared consulting the grand council would definitely influence her. She needed to be sure her decisions were her own. She didn't want to have any regrets.

Marta dug the stick out of her pocket and stared at the two blue lines. After a while tears filled her eyes, blurring the lines. Different scenes played out in her head: she and Jaron happy walking together, hand in hand; she and Jaron arguing bitterly, her in tears; she and Jaron running around a park playing with a cute toddler; standing in front of her parents telling them the news and them losing their shit; walking into planned parenthood alone or going with one or both of her girls; being alone and exhausted with a screaming baby; seeing Jaron with another girl; going to school; going to a job she hates but can't quit; she and Jaron married with kids having Thanksgiving with her parents.

Seeing the shadows begin to stretch across the walls and ceiling, Marta knew she had to compose herself. Her mother would be home and Jaron would be getting off work. It took a few minutes before she could blow her nose and clean up. She drank some water then lay with a cold towel over her face to bring down the puffiness. Once she looked reasonably normal, she felt better. Maybe she could fake her way out of this. No one would know.

## Daddy Day

“Hey daddy!” I run into his arms, almost knocking him down.

“Whoa! Hey, baby girl.” He picks me up and swings me around so that I feel like I’m flying.

“You’re late. Have her back on time. She has school tomorrow.” My mother is standing in the doorway with her usual frown.

“Hey, Marta. I’ll make sure she’s back by 6.”

“And make sure you feed her.” The door slams.

I ask Daddy, “Where’s your car?”

“Daddy got a new car.”

First he shows me the license plate, “ROYAL1”.

“I had to order that special.”

The car door is so big he has to help me get in.

“Daddy, what kind of car is this?”

“This is a Lincoln. You like it?”

“Yeah! It’s better than our car... I missed you, Daddy. You were supposed to come yesterday so I could spend the night.”

“Oh, I was busy, baby.”

“I haven’t seen you in so long.”

“I know. I had to go out of town. I told your mama.”

“Mama said she wished she could go somewhere. Where’d you go?”

“Me and Wendy went to the Bahamas.”

“Can me and you go on a trip?”

“What kind of trip you wanna take? Where you wanna go?”

“Can we go to Disney World??”

“Disney World?” He laughs. “Ooh, you’re expensive.”

He pulls over. “You stay here. I’ll be right back.”

When he comes back, he’s carrying a big bag with a zipper down the middle and lays it on the backseat.

“What’s that, Daddy? Where did you go?”

“I had to pick up my suit from the tailor.”

“Oh. I thought you got me a present.”

“A present?” he laughs.

“Remember last time you said you would get me a present?”

“You want some ice cream? Let’s go get some ice cream.”

I get a double scoop of chocolate. Mama never lets me do that.

“Are we going to your house now?”

“Don’t you wanna go see your cousin Shayna?”

I like Shayna but her brothers always tease me.

“I don’t want to go to Shayna’s. Can’t we just go to your house?”

“Well I gotta take care of some business, baby. I’ll come back to get you.”

“Come back fast.”

He laughs at this, “Okay. You’re the boss.”

I stay at Shayna’s for too long before he comes back.

“Hey, baby girl! You ready to go?”

When we’re back in the car I ask, “Now are we going to your house?”

“No, it’s almost time to take you back. You hungry? Let’s go get something to eat.”

“I don’t wanna go back. I want to stay with you.”

“You heard your mama. And you got school tomorrow.”

“I want to live with you.”

“Tabby, you know you can’t live with me.”

“Why can’t I come live with you?”

“Aw, come on, Tabitha. We can’t do this every time.”

I don’t cry.

He lets me get a happy meal and a chocolate shake from the Mcdonald’s drive thru.

“Don’t start eating yet. Wait until you get home. I don’t want you getting grease all over my car.”

When we get back to my house, he tells me to make sure that I have everything so that he doesn’t have to make a trip because I forgot something.

“I love you, baby girl.” He kisses both my cheeks.

“I love you, Daddy.” I give him the biggest hug I can.

He watches while I walk to the house. Mama must have heard the car because she opens the door before I knock. I turn around to wave goodbye and Daddy waves and pulls away.

Mama frowns down at me, “Well, at least he got you something to eat.”

## Award Day

Clayton was excited for his mother to come home. He couldn't wait to surprise her with the math award he won that day. She would be so proud of him. He was proud of himself. He was nearly bursting when he heard Mina's key in the lock.

"Clayton! Get in here! Clayton!"

Something was wrong.

"Yes, Mama?" Uh oh. Mina was in one of her moods.

"Look at this kitchen! I told you before I went to work this morning that I wanted you to clean the kitchen when you got home from school. Look at this fucking mess!"

"But I did clean up, Mama."

"You back talking me, boy?"

"No, Ma'am. No, Mama."

"Don't back talk me, boy. I will tear your ass up." her face was fury. "What the hell do you call this, huh?" she pointed to the soda can and plate on the counter.

"I had some..."

"And this!" She pointed to the recycling bag by the back door. It had tipped over and spilled a jar and a plastic bottle onto the floor.

"I'm sorry, Mama. I'll clean that up."

"You're goddamn right you'll clean it up! It should have already been clean like I told you! But you think you grown and you don't have to listen. I don't care how big you are! This is my house! I run this!"



At just 12 years old, Clayton was able to see over the top of his mother's head. People joked about it all the time but Mina found nothing funny about it. She wanted everyone, especially Clayton, to know that she was still in charge.

Clayton was scared now. He stood wide-eyed, unsure what to do. Mina stormed out of the kitchen, cursing. Clayton could hear her tearing through her closet and knew she was looking for her thick leather belt. He began to cry. He tried really hard to be a good kid and just couldn't get it right. How could he get Mina to understand that he didn't want to be "in charge"?

Mina raged back into the kitchen, grabbed Clayton and started swinging.

"PLEASE, MAMA, NO!!" WHACK

"YOU THINK YOU GROWN??" WHACK "HUH? YOU DON'T HAVE TO LISTEN??" WHACK

"PLEASE, MAMA!" WHACK

This went on for several minutes. Clayton cried, screaming and begging for his mother to stop. Mina beat him until she was tired.

"The next time I tell you to do something, you do it! Now clean up this fucking mess!!"

Clayton stood shaking and sobbing.

"And shut up! I don't want to hear all that!"

Clayton forced himself to be as quiet as possible but the tears still streamed and he got hiccups. His head felt foggy and swollen. He hoped there were no noticeable

lumps. There was nothing he could do about that. He'd have to wear long sleeves to cover the red welts raised on his arms. He didn't want his friends to see them.

Stiff and sore, he still moved quickly to clean up. He didn't want his mother to come back into the kitchen and see anything out of place. Clayton could hear Mina talking on the phone, laughing about how Clayton tried her and she put him in his place. He felt ashamed. He really did want to be a good son. Clayton went back to his room and quietly cried himself to sleep.

"Clayton!"

He awoke with a start to find Mina standing over him holding the math award.

"Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Clayton instinctively flinched when she leaned down towards him. He braced himself for a smack. Instead, she swooped in to hug and kiss him.

"I'm so proud of you!"

Clayton didn't know how to respond. This is what he wanted but he just felt numb.

## The Chicken Dinner Incident

“Wait, Sean.” Letty leaned up from the couch.

“Come on, girl,” Sean pulled Letty back towards him.

“Stop! You smell that? I think the food is burning!” Letty sat up fumbling for her shirt. She ran into the kitchen just as the smoke detector went off.

**BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP**

She didn't know what to do first. She snatched the oven door open and smoke billowed out. She shut it again and turned it off. Next she opened the door and the window before grabbing a towel to fan in front of the smoke alarm. By this time Sean, still shirtless, had come into the kitchen to see what was happening. Smoke was still coming from the oven so he opened the door and took the roasting pan out.

“Damn, that's hot!” he said, dropping it on the stovetop.

Finally the room had cleared enough for the smoke detector to stop.

“My dad is going to kill me.” Letty was panicked.

The roasting pan and its contents still smoked. The chicken had long since passed golden brown and the potatoes and other vegetables were badly scorched.

“What's the big deal?” Letty was on the verge of tears and he didn't know how to handle that.

“What's the big deal?? Sean, look at this! I can't fix this!” Then the tears started and she stood helplessly looking at the ruined food.

“Why are you crying? Just make something else.”

“I can't make anything else! This is what my dad told me to cook.”

“Well tell him you burned it. It was an accident. It’s not a big deal”

“It is a big deal! It’s not like at your house.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I can’t do whatever I want and get away with it.”

“Neither can I!”

“Yeah but you don’t get in trouble like I do.”

Letty looked scared. Sean didn’t know what to do any more than she did.

“I’m sorry Letty but I have to go.”

“You’re leaving?? What am I gonna do??” She wept openly.

“I don’t know. but I really gotta go. My moms is waiting for me.”

“She wasn’t waiting for you before.”

“Nah. I just forgot.” He couldn’t look at her.

Letty glared at Sean through her tears. “I never should have let you in.” She followed him into the living room where he put on his shirt before grabbing the rest of his stuff.

“See you at school tomorrow, Letty.”

“Yeah and you better not say nothing to me.” Her rage absorbed her tears. She snatched open the front door then slammed it behind him.

Now she wailed. Fear and anger duked it out inside her. After releasing that onslaught of emotion, Letty was ready to deal with the crisis. She went back to the kitchen to assess. Even if she wanted to cook something else, there was nothing else thawed out. Her father would not be happy if there was no meat with his potatoes. Letty

decided she had time to buy a new chicken and start over. She would have to use some of her father's "emergency" money and find a way to put it back before he noticed.

The trip to the store was almost unsuccessful. Letty saw Ms. Otis walk inside just as she got there and that was almost as bad as seeing her father. Ms. Otis told everybody's everything. Letty remembered the time at a barbecue when her aunt Crystal said, "that's why she ain't got no man. Old nosy ass," and sucked her teeth.

"You ain't lying."

"She needs to watch herself. She gon tell on the wrong muthafucka one day and something's gon happen to her ass."

"Mmm hm."

Everybody agreed Ms. Otis was the worst until she came back over to the table and the subject suddenly changed to Uncle Edward's new car.

Letty couldn't have her father find out she had gone out when she was supposed to be home. She remembered the time her father forgot he gave her permission to go to McDonald's after school and the look in his eye as he accused her of being "laid up somewhere with one of those no good little hood niggas!"

To her father the worst thing in the world was "a trifling woman" and he wouldn't be known for having a trifling daughter. She was never exactly sure what "trifling" meant as its meaning seemed to change but she knew it was bad. And being "out in them damn streets" could earn her the moniker. Plus there was no telling what he would do to her. Letty hadn't been back to McDonald's since the incident because it reminded her of that day.

Fortunately for Letty, Ms. Otis didn't stay long. She was in and out in a few minutes. Apparently, shopping for one doesn't take long. Letty ran in and grabbed a chicken and a new foil roasting pan and was on her way. Back home, she dumped the old pan in the trash before preparing the new meal. She had so much homework that night too. That's why she had let Sean's goofy butt in in the first place. They had started off studying but that hadn't lasted very long. Now she would have to get up early to finish it all. Her father would notice if she stayed up late and she didn't want any extra attention.

Letty braced herself when she heard her father's key in the door.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hey, baby. Ooh, I'm tired. They worked me today."

"Want me to run you a bath?"

"No, that's okay, baby. I wanna eat first. Smells good in here."

To Letty's delight and surprise, dinner was uneventful. Her father was none the wiser as he went in for seconds and thirds. He actually seemed happy.

"Good job on dinner tonight, baby."

It was after dinner that all hell broke loose. As these things do, it started simply enough. Her father cleared his plate and went to scrape the remnants into the trash.

"What's this, Letty?"

She had forgotten to empty the trash can. Her father was looking down at all of the evidence of the ruined meal.

"You mean the garbage can?"

“No. What’s this IN the garbage can?” He put the plate down and turned to look at Letty, his foot still on the pedal holding the can’s lid aloft. Letty opened her mouth but no words came out. She stepped forward with trepidation to peer into the can, then backed away with her father’s eyes drilling into her.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. It was an accident,” her voice trembled.

“An accident...”

“I burned the chicken and had to make another one.”

“What kept you so busy that you couldn’t do what you were supposed to be doing?”

Letty stood wide-eyed.

“WHAT. WERE. YOU. DOING?”

“...I, I...”

“You You WHAT? Don’t tell me you fell asleep and almost burned my house down!”

“No, Daddy, I wasn’t sleep.”

“Then why you crying?? What was you doing? Something else you ain’t have no business doing?”

“No, Daddy.”

“I’m not gon ask you again what you were doing?” This he didn’t yell. His tone was low and even and scary.

“I was doing my homework. I was reading and I forgot I was cooking.”

“You forgot?”

“Yes, Daddy. I was busy doing homework.”

“You do homework and make dinner every day, Letitia. Why did you forget today?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m gonna find out what you were doing. You better believe.”

“I wasn’t doing nothing, Daddy. I swear.”

“Then why you crying? Why you try to hide it?”

Letty could only cry more.

“You think you slick. Where’d you get another chicken?”

“I went to Jensen’s.”

“Where’d you get the money? You go in my drawer??”

“Yes, daddy but I will pay you back.”

“How, Letitia? You ain’t got no job.”

“I can ask Grandma.”

“No you are not going to ask my mother for money for some mess you did. All you do is find ways to spend money! ‘Gimme this. I need that.’ I’m sick of it!”

“I’m sorry, Daddy. It was an accident.”

“You were an accident! But some mistakes you can’t fix. You and your mama have taken everything from me. You gon end up trifling just like her.”

Letty stared at the floor.

“Well we don’t waste food in this house. You’re gonna eat this.”

“What?”



“Don’t ‘what’ me, Letitia! I will slap the taste out of your mouth. I said you are going to eat this chicken you tried to hide.”

“But it was in the garbage. I can’t eat that.”

“Yes, you will.”

“Daddy, please don’t make me eat that. It’s all burned up and was in the garbage. I’m really sorry. I can skip the school trip so you won’t have to pay for it. I’m sorry I spent the money but please don’t make me eat that.”

“Nah. You ain’t gon have folks talking about me like I can’t afford to send you.”

Her father pulled a fork and knife from the dish rack and handed them to Letty.

“Unless you want to eat with your hands...”

“Daddy, please don’t ma”

“LETITIA JEAN HARLOWE! You will eat this food right fucking now.”

Letty pulled the least offensive looking piece from the charred and dented pan and gingerly put it in her mouth.

“Eat it!”

The shame and degradation were more overwhelming than the revulsion she felt as she chewed.

“Here.” Her father had ripped the wing from the bird.

After the next bite, Letty began to gag.

“Fine. Stop! Don’t eat it. The last thing I need is for you to get sick, another pain in my ass. But I want you to remember this the next time you wanna waste my food and money.”

## Wendy

"Wendy, you have to get up now." I looked down at my mother crumpled on the couch. The stink of stale alcohol and funk rose from her body. Straight vodka this time. There was no pretense last night. She usually tried to stick to wine. Plenty of it, to be sure, but she was usually able to keep it together. Shit! Did something happen yesterday? I should have known when she didn't call or come home. That was the first clue. But she'd been so good lately I didn't want to believe it.

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It was getting dark and Kenny had been whining for an hour when I fixed us hot dogs for dinner. I helped him with his homework while I did mine.

"Is she coming home tonight?" He had that nervous look he was too young to have already.

"I don't know, Kenny."

Around midnight she finally called. "Hi, honey. Everything okay?" She was in a good mood then.

"When are you coming home?"

"What'dyou say honey? What's at home?" She slurred only slightly.

A man who sounded too close and too loud said, "No! You can't go now, baby! We're having a good time!" Laughter.

"I'll be home in a little while 'kay, honey?"

"Mom, please..." Click.

I got scared then. Would she be back in time? The social worker was due at 10 but sometimes they were sneaky and came early. What would we do then? I had been able to keep me and Kenny at home out of foster care but Wendy was back to fucking up. Somebody was gonna notice. Somebody *had* noticed. Ms. Otis next door swears it wasn't her who called child services, but then who was it?

\*\*\*

I looked back down at Wendy. She was a mess. Makeup crusted and smeared. Hair knotted and tangled and matted with lint. She was only wearing panties under a bathrobe. I tried covering her with a blanket but she kept throwing it off exposing slack breasts and the stretch marks that crossed her belly. Me and Kenny were used to seeing her with no clothes. She didn't like to wear them much at home and she let us know often enough that it was her house, her rules. Still, those stretch marks always made me sad. They looked so violent and painful. And they were my fault.

"Wendy!" I was more insistent now. We were running out of time. She needed a lot of work to be even almost presentable.

"Look. I have breakfast for you." Tapping and rocking her now. "Wake up! You have to get up!"

With a groan she opened one bloodshot eye, then the other.

"What, Goddammit?! What do you want?!" She slung her feet over the side and sat hunched on the sofa. She cocked her head to the side, eying me warily. "Fuck!"

“That lady is coming today. The one from child services.” I handed her a mug of instant coffee with lots of sugar, the way she liked it. She took it and put it down without drinking any. She lit a cigarette instead. “What time is it?”

“It’s almost 9. She’s ‘sposed to be here in an hour.”

“Yeah, and those fuckers like to show up early.” She reached for the coffee, drank and smoked, pushing away the plate of toaster waffles and boiled eggs. At the end of her cigarette, she heaved herself up and headed to the bathroom. Kenny and I looked at each other with something like hope.

There was a knock at the door. We both near burst into tears. Wendy hadn’t even started the shower. Another knock.

“Is that the door? Those sons of bitches!” Wendy croaked from the bathroom.

I crept to the front door as quietly as I could and looked through the peephole. My heart beat like crazy. I almost cried with relief when I saw that it was my best friend Shayna. I cracked open the door.

“Hey, Shayna. Sorry. I can’t go running today. I have a family thing. I’ll talk to you later, okay?” That was all I needed to say. She understood. Her family was a little fucked up too.

“It was just Shayna!” I yelled to the bathroom, cueing Wendy to start the shower. It was up to her now. I kept chewing my fingernails from anxiety so I tried to busy my hands by straightening the living room and wherever Wendy had been. Made Kenny brush his hair and make his bed again.

By 9:40 Wendy was washed and dressed and looked like what she thought a mom should. She'd tamed her hair into a low bun and was wearing a velvet sweatsuit. You could barely notice that her hands shook a little as she smoked another cigarette and drank another cup of sweet coffee. I hoped the social worker wouldn't notice.

It was just a few minutes later that we heard a knock on the door.

"Mrs. Thompson, It's Cynthia Freeman from CPS. May I come in?"

Wendy snatched the door open and waved her inside. "I don't want everybody in my business."

The CPS lady came in and did what the other social workers did. She looked around. "Poked her nose into every damn thing," Wendy would say. She asked Wendy a bunch of questions, then Kenny and me. We did our best to look like Wendy was raising us right. We said the right things:

"Yes, we have three meals every day."

"No, our mother never leaves us home alone."

"Yes, our mother helps us with homework."

"No, we never feel like we are in danger."

"Are you gonna take us away? Please don't take us away. I wanna stay with my mom!" Kenny was actually in tears, poor little guy.

Well that was all Wendy could take. "Alright! That's enough. You cannot come in here upsetting my kids!"

"My apologies, Mrs. Thompson. I..."

"Is there anything else?"

“No, I have everything I need. Thank you, Mrs. Thompson. You will hear back from CPS in the next fourteen days. You have a good day.”

Wendy didn't bother to respond. She just closed and locked the door behind her.

## Rollerland

The day that mattered most to folks in the know was Saturday because Saturday night was Rollerland night. Some other skating rinks were newer and fancier. Skate! boasted about their celebrity chef menu and Wheels had a state of the art skate delivery system. Rollerland wasn't the biggest rink in town. The lines for skates and concessions were always at least ten deep and once you were at the front there was a good chance they didn't have your size or had sold out of the food you wanted. Still no one on the Southside would argue that it wasn't the best rink in town and that Saturday night was THE NIGHT to be at Rollerland.

Rollerland was owned by Richard and Roberta Smalls. They opened Rollerland as a labor of love, wanting to create a place that the whole community could enjoy. They went all in, installing a sound system that was better than some of the clubs downtown. The real coup was that they had somehow managed to snag Black Velvet to man the ones and twos every Saturday before his set at Lincoln House. There were rumors as to how the Smalls were able to get one of the city's hottest up and coming DJs, on Saturday night no less.

"I heard Robert held a pistol to his head."

"I heard that he threatened to break his hands with a baseball bat."

"Well, I heard that the Smalls are swingers and he's their third."

The truth was that Black Velvet, aka Winston Quigley, was Roberta's godson. She was a good friend of his mother's before she died and Roberta had kept Winston out of trouble and put him through school. It was all love.

A highlight of every night at Rollerland was when the Smalls laced up and skated. Not only because of their impressive skills. They were revered, like a favorite aunt and uncle. Before opening Rollerland, Richard had been a cop in the 34th precinct for a number of years. After leaving the force, he opened Smalls Lounge, where he tended bar for the neighborhood locals. It was there that he and Roberta got to know each other. Roberta owned a bistro nearby and would have a drink or two after she closed at night. It didn't take long for them to get together. They were married within a year. Everyone agreed that they'd never seen either of them so happy. Their joy was infectious.

Clayton and Shayna got to Rollerland just as it opened.

"Where are Letty and your cousin?"

"I don't know but they better hurry up if Tabitha wants to rent skates."

"What about Letty? She don't skate?"

"Oh. Letty got her own skates."

"Of course she does."

"What's that supposed to mean? That's my girl."

"Well your girl is bougie."

"Letty's cool. You just used to hanging out with hoodlums."

"Yeah, whatever. I guess that makes me a hoodlum. Which means you LOVE hoodlums." Clayton trapped Shayna in a hug, kissing her all over her face.



“Yeah, well, you lucky you cute. Oh, here they come... Hey, Yall!”

“Hey, what’s up, love birds.” Letty leaned in for hugs.

“Hey, Letty. Nice skates.”

“Thanks, Clayton.”

“Hey, Clayton. Hey, Shayna.” Tabitha made her way over.

“Wutup, Cuz. You finally made it!”

The four made their way inside and paid admission. Opening the next set of doors released a wave of sound that sucked them into the main room. The DJ booth was at one end and Black Velvet was reigning supreme. More than the thumping bass and driving rhythm of the music, there was the sound of whistles; wheels gliding over maple wood; people talking, laughing and squealing. Colorful lights illuminated everything.

“Aww, shit! This is my jam.” Clayton did a two-step.

“Hey!” Shayna joined in.

Letty and Tabitha stood taking it all in before Letty announced, “it’s not too crowded yet. I’m gonna get us lockers. Yall go get skates.”

Clayton, Shayna, and Tabitha made their way to the rental area.

“Tabitha, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you here.”

“Nah. This is Tabby’s first time here.” Shayna gave her a squeeze.

“For real, Tabitha?”

“Yeah. My aunt don’t let her do nothing.”

“Nope. My mom is crazy.”

“I get it. My moms be tripping too.” Clayton nodded knowingly.

“She don’t like me.” Shayna rolled her eyes.

“It’s not that. She just don’t know you yet, Shayna.”

“And don’t want to know me.”

“Well at least yall can date. If my mother has her way, I never will.”

“Yeah, Aunt Marta don’t play. I’m sorry, Cuz.”

“Yeah, that sucks, Tab.”

“NEXT! What size?” They each traded their shoes for brown skates with big orange numbers on the back.

“Tabitha, can you skate?”

“I used to skate all the time when I was little but I haven’t for a while so we’ll see. I might have to stay in the kiddie rink. How about you?”

“Oh, Clayton can skate,” Shayna bragged.

“I’m a’ight” Clayton tugged on imaginary lapels and spun in a circle. “

“Alright, Mr. Showoff.”

“I’m ready. You two stay here while I take our stuff and find Letty.”

“Thanks, Clayton.”

“I got you.” He gathered their belongings and skated away.

“Look at his cute butt.”

“I am not looking at your boyfriend’s butt.”

“Your loss.”

Just as they finished lacing up, Clayton rolled up with Letty behind him.

“Shayna, you ready to glide?”

“Yeah. Yall coming?”

They rolled over to the main rink. Skaters sped past them as singles, duos, and groups speckled with light reflecting from the disco ball. Clayton grabbed Shayna’s hand and off they went.

Letty turned to Tabitha. “You ready, Tab?”

“Let’s do it.”

About thirty minutes later Tabitha, Shayna, and Clayton were circling the rink—Letty had to get something from her bag—when they noticed a lot of activity by the DJ booth. They skated off the hardwood to get a closer look.

Clayton noticed her first. “Oh shit! I think that’s Fulani over there.”

“Where? No, it’s not.”

“It is! Look, Shayna. That’s her!”

“Yeah, he’s right. She’s wearing the jacket she had on in the “NaNana” video.”

“Ohhh. That is her.”

“Told you!”

“Letty is gonna flip when she finds out Fulani is here.” Tabitha looked around for Letty.

“I know. She made me watch all of her videos the last time we hung out. She’s obsessed. I don’t see what the big deal is. She ain’t all that.”

“Don’t tell Letty. She might bite you.” Shayna and Tabitha laughed at that. It was a running joke the three shared. In seventh grade, Carl Johnson called Letty a dyke and

she bit him. It had been a whole thing at school because she broke the skin and he had to get a tetanus shot and then folks started calling Letty “Cujo” for a while.

“I’m gonna get her.” It was just a moment before Tabby and Letty rolled back over.

“So what’s the big surprise? Tabby said yall had something to show me.”

“Look over there, where the booth is.” Shayna pointed as discreetly as she could.

The three tracked her gaze to see the moment that Letty recognized her idol. It did not disappoint. She was like a five year old on Christmas morning.

“Letty, close your mouth.” Shayna laughed.

“O my god. I can’t believe she’s here!”

“Yup, there she is.” Tabitha was amused by her friend.

“Ooh, do you think she’s gonna skate?” Letty’s eyes opened wider than before.

“Maybe. Last month J-Rock was here with his boys. And he can skate!” Clayton did a cross-legged spin.

“Letty, honey, you look a little crazy right now. You staring at her like a stalker. We should go skate some more.” Shayna took Letty’s hand and they rolled back to the rink. As if on cue, Black Velvet started blending “NaNaNa” into the mix and got on the mic.

“Hello, Rollerland! We have a very special guest in the house tonight. The one and only Fulani is here! That’s right. Fulani! Give it up. She is here looking for skaters to appear in her next music video! That’s right, people. This is your chance! So get out there and show her what you got!”

And they did. Anybody who thought they had skills wanted to prove it, including Clayton and Letty. Spins, jumps, cross legs, crazy legs, gliding backwards, group choreography. Everything was on display. Black Velvet played a couple more of Fulani's songs before lowering the music and getting back on the mic.

"Alright, skaters! That was great! We have some real superstars in the building tonight. All the skaters in the rink, gather at the sides while our very own Mr. and Mrs. Smalls make their way through to inform the lucky skaters." He handed the mic to Fulani.

"I just want to say thank you to everyone! You are all amazing! I can't wait to make this video. It's gonna be hot. I'm looking forward to working with some amazing skaters I saw here tonight. My new single "Watch Ya Mouth" will be out next month. Make sure you get a copy! You're gonna love it. Thank you! I love you all!"

"The queen, everybody! Fulani! Make sure you pick up "Watch Ya Mouth" when it comes out next month!" And with that, he turned the volume back up.

The Smalls skated out to inform the skaters who had been chosen. Letty began to shake when Mrs. Smalls skated over to her and Clayton.

"Hey! The both of you are great. Fulani wants you to be in her video."

Letty squealed and spun with glee.

"Oh, that's great." Clayton played it a little cooler.

"Can we meet her??" Letty was beaming.

"Unfortunately, she's doing a surprise performance after this so she has to leave now. But you'll see her next Sunday at the shoot."

“I can’t wait!” Letty squealed.

Mrs. Smalls took Clayton and Letty’s contact information and gave them instructions for the shoot before skating away to make someone else’s dream come true.

“This is so cool! Wait til I tell my dad!”

“That’s my friend!” Tabby’s smile was as big as Letty’s.

“I can’t believe it. My boyfriend is gonna be a celebrity.” Shayna gave Clayton a peck on the lips.

“Oh, stop. I am not gonna be a celebrity. Well, maybe.” Clayton knocked imaginary dust off his shoulders.

“I can’t wait!”

## Diplodocus

Charles was insignificant. Not due to his weight or stature. He was quite stout. A large man with a great big round belly. His head was also round, making him resemble a snowman come to life. More than once somebody had looked at him and thought, “he kinda looks like Frosty, don’t he?”

Charles considered himself to be a very important person. VIP all the way. He told people that he was an artist, though he worked in no specific form or showed any particular talent. Sometimes he would sketch while riding the subway or sitting in a park or bar. He sat in coffee shops working on a script that he could never finish, drinking expensive and complex coffee drinks. He was a DJ at some local spots but was never put into the permanent rotation. His “eclectic” music choices often puzzled patrons. Whenever he went out, he made sure to wear something that he designed, a piece of jewelry or other accessory, advertising it as his own. He was working on a capsule collection that he intended to sell to local boutiques. His work would surely sell. And he could charge whatever he wanted because each piece would be original and one of a kind and so highly sought after. An original Charles Richarde.

Charles was born Charles Tulane Richards, known as Charlie Richards by everyone in his hometown. After moving to the city, he replaced the “s” in Richards with an “e” and softened the “ch”, instantly transforming small town Charlie Richards into cosmopolitan Charles Richarde. He was expecting notice and acclaim to follow immediately but wasn’t humbled when it didn’t. After all, greatness wasn’t always recognized at first. He figured this was “paying his dues.” It bugged the shit out of him,

though, that people he considered inferior didn't recognize what a big deal he was. Jealousy and envy. What else could it be? Just haters hating.

Charles hated taking calls at work. Since becoming manager he mostly only dealt with "problem callers." So he tried to look busy when he saw Jayden looking around, obviously in need of help. He hoped that Jayden would see one of the other managers, Latrice or Riyana, before spotting him. They were both already on calls. Charles was up.

"Good morning. This is Charles. How may I assist you today?"

"Charles? Who are you? You're not my doctor. I want to speak to Dr. Herbert."

"Ma'am, This is the doctor's answering service. My n"

"What do you mean this is the answering service? It's business hours. Why would it be the answering service? Where is Dr. Herbert?"

"Ma'am. The doctor is not available now. Do you have an emergency?"

"It is urgent that I speak to her! Please get her on the line."

"Ma'am, if you are having a medical emergency, I have to advise you to call 911."

"I am not calling 911! Dr. Herbert told me that she would be available if I needed to speak to her. I need to speak to her! Please get Dr. Herbert on the phone!"

"Ma'am. There is no need to shout. I can hear just fine."

"I am not shouting. Get someone who can help me!"

"This is Charles from the doctor's answering service."

"Are you getting smart with me, Charles from the doctor's answering service?? My name is Letty Harlowe. Call Dr. Herbert and tell her that I need to speak to her. Now!"



He knew who she was. Letty Harlowe. She was famous on the local underground scene and starting to get some international buzz. Truth be told, she was doing everything he wanted to do, but successfully.

“Would you like to leave a message for the doctor? I can take your name.”

“I just told you my name! I am not leaving a message! I want to SPEAK to Dr. Herbert!”

This could have been over already. He happened to know that Dr. Herbert was easily reachable, especially for so-called VIPs. Still, he offered little help.

“Ma’am, I am trying to help you. What is your name, please?”

“Letty Harlowe! How many times do I have to tell you?? My name is Letty Harlowe!”

“Can you spell that please?”

“LETTY HARLOWE! L-E-T-T-Y H-A”

“Excuse me. Are you saying D like diplodocus? L E D D Y?”

“Diplodocus?? What? No, T! T like Tom! LetTEE Harlowe.”

“Thank you, Ms. Harlowe. Why are you calling today?”

“I’m calling to SPEAK TO DR. HERBERT!!”

“One moment, please.”

She was still ranting when he brought Dr. Herbert on the line. Charles thought he heard her dissolve into tears before he disconnected. He chuckled to himself, feeling gratified.

## Dick Ninjas

It's so nice out, Jade thought as she left the library. The sun had gone down but it wasn't quite dark yet. A nice breeze was blowing. She wanted more. Summer in the city was so fleeting. The days were already getting cooler and shorter. It wouldn't be long before everyone, including her, was bundled up and grumpy again. For now, a light sweater was perfect. She took her time going down the stairs and didn't notice that not one, not two, but three(!) buses were coming. There was no way she would make it. Before she could cross the street, they had all been boarded and departed. Shit! How long before the next one now? It didn't make sense to wait. She was only going just a little farther than the length of the park. An evening stroll through the park would be nice.

The paths were already lit. Evening joggers were putting themselves to work. Daytime park goers were on their way inside. Jade blended into the array of characters. It began to rain lightly so she put up her hood. She laughed as she did. A private joke with herself. How many times had this happened to her? She decides to walk home through the park only for it to start raining midwalk. All she could do was keep going.

Jade wore her naturally kinky hair short, coiling close to the scalp. The rain would have no ill effects on it, which was a good thing because the open weave of her sweater offered little protection. Her arms were getting wet. If it began to rain much harder, it would cling to her thin frame. The last time she had been wearing a dress that became increasingly see-through as she got soaked walking across from Park Slope. But

it didn't seem to be raining harder and at least she had on jeans and a loose t-shirt. Nothing to worry about. No need to rush. She could mosey as easy as she pleased.

Tree branches swayed, waving their glistening leaves. Every now and then, Jade would stop to gaze up at a particular tree or slow down to run her fingers along the hedges bordering the path. Fireflies began their twinkle. It felt magical. Like it was just for her. She hadn't passed anyone for a couple minutes. There were fewer people on the interior path. The joggers were circling the main road. She was in her own little world.

As she stopped to admire a very old and majestic looking tree, she saw someone approaching from a distance. They too seemed to be admiring the trees. Jade smiled and continued walking, delighted by her surroundings. Up ahead two men sat on a bench, not bothered by the rain. Her smile broadened. Although they both looked at her pointedly, only one offered a half smile. The other looked slightly disappointed. She didn't think much of it other than, it's Brooklyn. A lone man sat on each of the next couple benches. As she walked past, one got up and walked toward the other. Maybe he needs a light or wants to bum a cigarette, she thought. Continuing on, two older teens on bikes pedaled by slowly. After rounding a bend, she noticed that the figure that had been in the distance was closer now. He appeared to be a young man in his 20s, around her age. He turned to look at a tree when she turned to look at him. Odd, she thought.

She saw some movement in front of her. It was a couple emerging from the bushes. Probably peeing. Although, dudes usually weren't so discreet as to go *into* the bushes. They might stand in a shadow but mostly they just whipped it out. Like that dude! A man who had been sitting on a bench, fumbled with his fly before standing up.

As he did so, another man emerged from the bushes near him. They began to talk in whispers.

A lightbulb went on in Jade's head. Dick ninjas! She had heard about them from a couple of her guy friends. Apparently certain areas of the park are cruising spots for gay men. You just see them in the shadows. They pop out like ninjas. She laughed to herself. That's why that one guy looked disappointed to see her. It's boy time!

Jade turned around again to get another glimpse of the action. This time the guy who had been in the distance was close enough to see his face clearly. Even though he pretended to be looking away, she could see that he was a cute boy. That put her at ease. He was just family out cruising. She kept walking, feeling both amused and like she was in on a secret. She had finally encountered dick ninjas in their natural habitat.

As she continued along, Jade began to wonder about the cute dude behind her, the tree admirer. She turned to see that he was still there. This time he pretended to tie his shoe but he also gave her a smile. Why did he seem to be following her instead of cruising the boys? Then it hit her. He thought she was a boy! It wouldn't be the first time. Because of her lanky body and androgynous fashion, she often confused people. She had been called "Sir" so many times, she just accepted it. A woman once accused her of being a man in the women's room at Bloomingdale's.

Finally hip to what was happening, and close to home—she didn't want him to follow her there—Jade stopped and turned around to face her admirer.

"You know I'm a girl, right?" She smiled.

He laughed, covering his face, “Why you embarrass me?” Then he turned and walked away.

## Beach Day

My friend Star was one of the most selfish people I had ever met. It was one of the things that fascinated me about her. She always made sure she got hers. I remember the first time she invited me to the beach. Before we even hit the sand, “hey, can I get gas and parking money from you guys?” I’m used to offering gas money so I didn’t mind that she already had a seasonal parking pass. I assumed—wrongly—she was struggling like the rest of us. So what if she turned a profit? Good for her! I will admit that I felt put out when she couldn’t manage carrying her own things. “Do you guys mind helping me? Can you each take something? This cooler is so heavy.” All of our bags were heavy.

I was excited to be going to the beach. Work had been tough and I needed to chill and unwind. City beaches aren't the best so I usually only went while I was away on vacation. I’d been to Coney Island a couple times but I had never gotten in the water. Not until a day of heavy drinking at the Mermaid Parade. I plunged in without a care. After that it was easy for Star to convince me to join her for a beach day.

I had never met Star’s friends Charles and Bella so I had some anxiety. Being a bartender, I often had to deal with people I wouldn’t otherwise. Plus, I assumed that her friends would be white, even if they weren’t as blonde and blue-eyed as Star (something she liked to reference). It could get awkward and I didn’t want to feel uncomfortable on my day off. Fortunately, I had nothing to worry about. Charles was Black! And although he was a little weird, he was funny and harmless. I really liked Bella. She was so cute and bubbly, with big brown eyes that reminded me of an anime character.

I hated carrying so much gear and the set up seemed to take forever but it was worth it. We had everything. Our area spanned four blankets with a canopy ringed with coolers, a couple speakers, pillows, pool noodles, and other beach toys and accessories.

“Hey, are you guys hungry? I have a ton of food. I brought some bacon wrapped figs, veggie sushi, papaya salad, and some hummus I made as well as a pineapple salsa to go with chips.” Bella pulled several containers from her cooler.

“Wow! You made all of that??” I was beyond impressed. It put my little bodega sandwich and chips to shame.

“Yeah. Bella is an amazing chef. I love her food.” Star was already reaching for a fig.

“That’s so nice of you to say, Star. Here. Charles, have a fig.”

“You know I will.” Charles took a couple from the container and passed it to me.

“Oh my god! These are really good! Where do you work? I have to go to your restaurant.”

“Oh I don’t work in a restaurant. I wo-”

“She’s a private chef. She cooks for Robert Deniro’s family!” Star interrupted her to brag.

“Well not just Robert Deniro. I have other clients who aren’t famous.”

“Oh, you fancy.” Charles joked.

“No, just lucky. I was a sous chef in Tribeca at Clio before it closed. He used to come in a lot. When he heard we were closing, he asked if I would cook for him sometimes. I already had a few private clients, friends of my parents and their business

partners. I think I did a cocktail party for him first. Now I do all his parties and some meal prep.”

“That’s so cool.” Star beamed like a proud mama and spooned out some papaya salad.

“It’s not bad,” Bella agreed.

“Not nearly as impressive as your spread, but I brought a rum punch that I made.”

“Yeah! I’ll definitely have some. Tabitha makes the best drinks.” Star passed me her tumbler.

“I try.”

“Well I’ve got this.” Charles held up a formidable joint.

“Oooh!”

“Perfect. Let’s have that after we eat.”

“If anybody’s interested.” Not to be outdone, Star held up a ziplock pouch with mushrooms.

“Alright!”

“Hell yeah!”

“I’m in.”

“Great! These are really good.” Star pulled three more pouches out of her bag and tossed one to each of us. I couldn’t believe how thoughtful and generous that was. We all thanked her then dug into our pouches. We ate and drank. We couldn’t praise Bella enough. Everything she made was delicious. My rum punch was a hit. After smoking, we were all a bit logy so we lolled on our blankets before going in the water.



“Hey you guys ready to go in?” Charles stood up and stretched. We all agreed it was time.

“Oh wait. I don’t want us to forget. Can you guys give me the money for the shrooms?”

“Yeah, sure. How much?” Bella and Charles both reached for their bags.

“Forty.”

Okay. I was the newbie and didn’t want to be “that” girl, so I smiled and handed over the cash. Besides, I had the money so no big deal.

“I don’t have any cash. I have to give you bud instead.” Charles held up a fat little bag that he tossed to Star.”

“Great.”

With the heat and the shrooms kicking in, the ocean's cold embrace was exactly what we needed.

Initially we all plunged in just to cool off. Once we acclimated, the water was so delightful that no one wanted to leave.

“The noodles! We need the pool noodles.” This was Star.

“Great idea!”

“Charles, you should be a gentleman and go get them.” Star’s smile didn’t reach her eyes.

Charles looked a little annoyed by the request but Star looked more annoyed that he might not do it.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get them. I want a drink anyway.”

The noodles were a great idea. I had never used them to float in the ocean and it was a revelation. It was possible to bob in the waves with relative ease. Bella and Charles had a wave of energy and decided to toss around a frisbee. Star and I continued to float and talk about silly things I can't remember now. I remember that we laughed and laughed. That's pretty much how the rest of the day went. It was filled with silly fun and giggles. I talked about some of the bizarre regulars who came to the bar. Charles told us about some of the crazy calls he got at work. At one point, Star insisted that we have a photo shoot. She even pulled out props to glam us up: beads, feathers, fans and glittery fabric. Those pictures are some of my favorites. We stayed until the sun began to set.

I heard my name as we were packing up. I looked around to see who it was and was delighted to see some beautiful and familiar faces.

"Letty! Jade!"

"Tabitha!"

"Hey, Tabby." Hugs and kisses all around.

"You're Letty Harlowe!"

"I am."

"Hi, I'm Bella. I saw you at the Tribeca Grand last month. It was great."

"Thank you. Bella. I'm glad you had a good time."

"Yeah, it was a lot of fun."

"Who are you?" Star wanted to know.

"Hey. I'm Letty and this is Jade. What's your name?"

“I’m Star.”

“Nice to meet you, Star.” Letty looked past her.

“Hi, I’m Charles.”

“Hey, Charles.”

“So do you work at the hotel?” Star continued.

“No. I did a DJ set.”

“It was the premier party for a new movie,” Bella explained.

“Oh you’re a DJ,” Star seemed disappointed.

“Sometimes.”

“Stop being modest. She DJ’s among other things. This cutie is a hard working, multi-talented artist who also dances, produces and directs videos, and is about to get her own show.” Jade pinched Letty’s butt and winked.

“Yeah, Letty is my fancy famous friend.” I stuck out my pinky.

“Shut up, Tabby.” Letty couldn’t not laugh.

“What’s the show that you’re working on?” Charles had a fanboy gleam in his eye.

“It’s still very early. I can’t say too much. I’m excited though.”

“Bella works for Robert De Niro!” Star announced.

“Oh, do you really?”

“Yeah, she’s his personal chef. She’s got a lot of rich clients. Her food is amazing.”

“Thanks, Star.” Bella seemed a little embarrassed.

“That’s great. He’s really nice for someone so famous. I worked with him during the Tribeca Film Festival.”

“Ooh, doing what?” Charles fanboying again.

“We should head to the car.” Star had finished gathering her things.

“Perfect. We’re all heading out.”

Charles pulled out another impressive joint. “Let’s smoke and walk.”

Letty told us about her Tribeca project and her current work with Paper Magazine.

“I’m so glad you’re my friend. I’m so proud of you.”

“Aww, thanks, Tabby. Hey, what are you doing tonight? Wanna come over? Jade’s cooking.”

“That’s all I need to hear. I’m coming with you! Where are you parked?”

Everybody but Star was amused.

The lot was mostly empty and the two cars weren’t very far apart from one another. We helped load Star’s car and I made sure I didn’t leave anything behind.

“Thanks, Star, I had so much fun today. And it was nice meeting you, Bella and Charles.”

“It was fun. I’m glad you came. Too bad you’re ditching me for your fancy friends.”

“I’ll see you around the neighborhood.”

## The Divorce

Your parents aren't supposed to blame you for their divorce. They're supposed to tell you that they both still love you and will love you forever and that it is absolutely not your fault but mommy and daddy just don't get along anymore. That's what they say in the movies. Nevertheless, my father blames me for the divorce. He said it without warning during our last phone conversation, "You told."

"What?"

"That's why we got divorced, me and your mama, 'cuz you told."

He was talking about the affair he was having when I was four and my mom was in nursing school. She took night classes so that she could be with me during the day and my dad would stay with me at night. Some nights my dad and I would visit his friend Diane and her son Marcus who was my age.

I liked those visits. Diane was always nice to me and I liked playing with Marcus. I was an often lonely only child and not only did those nights feel special, I thought my dad and I were playing a game.

"It's our secret. Don't tell Mommy."

I kept our secret. Until the night I let it slip. My mother and I were alone and she wasn't in the mood to play with me.

"I wish I could go see Marcus."

"Who's Marcus?"

"Me and daddy's secret friend."

"You and daddy's secret friend?"

“Yeah we visit him and Diane when you’re not here. Can me and you go see them?”

And just like that, I had ruined a marriage. I have hazy memories of when they split: lots of yelling, and then dad stopped living with us. I remember missing him and wanting him to come home.

For a moment after he tells me, I actually feel guilty. I wonder how much my life might have been different. What if I had been content coloring or whatever else I could have been doing? What if somebody was there to play with me? What if my dad had been there? That’s when I remember that my dad is an asshole.

He missed birthdays and holidays and had dubious excuses. He didn’t help when things were really bad between me and my mom when I was in high school. I was so angry for so long after that. I was only able to let it go and reach out to him after a few years of good therapy.

“You know what, Dad? You’re an asshole.”

I hung up then. Maybe I’ll listen to whatever bullshit he has to say another time.

## The Tea

"Hey, girl."

"Hey, Shayna."

"Gurl! I got something to tell you!"

"Ooh, you know I love me some good tea! What happened?"

"Okay. So you know big Kev, right?"

"Sade's baby daddy?"

"Yeah, him. I know him from school. So I ran into him downtown the other day."

"Oh, ran into, huh? Let me find out yall got something going on."

"Girl, please. You know that is not my type. He too big!"

"Really? Mm. Not for me. I'd love to climb that mountain."

"Ooooh! You know you wrong! Besides, what about Sade?"

"Yeah, you right. That bitch is crazy!"

"You ain't lying. You gonna let me tell the story or not?"

"Okay, go 'head."

"So anyway, I ran into him downtown. I had just left my appointment and stopped into this little pub I like down there and see him sitting at the bar. Turns out he's working there now. He was eating something before work. So I sat down and we started talking. You remember that white girl, Star, who was at my cousin's party?"

"Which one?"

"The blonde one who was drinking champagne out the bottle and shaking her titties everywhere."

"Oh, her. She was a lot."

"I don't know why my cousin likes her. But anyway she lives by my cousin and Kev lives over there too. So he knows Star from their hood. Anyway.."

"Oh Lord. I already see where this is going."

"Right. So they hooked up. He said she is a mess!"

"What happened??"

"First of all, he said she's been trying to for the longest. The bitch is THIRSTY. You hear me?"

"I believe it. I ain't mad at her. Shit, he fine as hell with his big self."

"Right. The mountain you wanna climb. So anyway, he said that he was hanging out with a couple of his boys and here she come. She asked if she could have some of their bottle, which was almost finished. She told them she would buy them all shots at this bar they were by. Everything was cool. They all did shots and was talking shit and whatever. His boys had to go. He said that's when she really started: rubbing his back, dancing all up on him, telling him all kinds of nasty shit she can do."

"Ew!"

"I know! Talking bout how Nancy Reagan probably ain't got shit on her."

"Oh that nasty heffa."

"Gurl, you know how they are. Do you know this bitch twisted a straw with her tongue!"

"Shit, I don't know if I would say no to that."

"Girl, stop. You stoopid."

"I'm saying."



"Well you ain't wrong. He said that's what got him too. She did that and leaned into him and they started up right there at the bar. He said she was letting him feel all over her and she was rubbing her ass on him."

"That must have been a scene."

"For real. So they go back to her apartment and he said it was decorated all crazy. And her bedroom looked like some kind of sex dungeon. Handcuffs and shit. He said he wouldn't let her put them on him. He said ain't nothing sexy about no Black man in handcuffs."

"I see what he saying but I can think of some sexy men in cuffs."

"That's cause you a freak."

"Shut up."

"Anyway, he said she said she wasn't wearing no panties."

"Oh she nasty."

"She was ready to go. So she unzips his pants and her eyes got all big like she ain't never seen nothing like that in her life!"

"I know that's right!"

"She wouldn't even let him put the condom on. She took it and put it on with her mouth."

"Oh she just a ho. So was it good?"

"He said the head was a'ight but the rest wasn't much."

"Girl, no!"

"He said she wanted to take pictures!"

"What?? Did he let her?"

"Nah. He said he wasn't letting no crazy white girl take pictures of him. Who knows what she would do with them."

"That's crazy."

"Yeah. So anyway, he said he's been trying to avoid her but they live in the same hood so it hasn't been successful. That's why he was at work early. So he wouldn't run into her.

"Ooh, that is a mess. But that's what he get. He knew she was crazy."

"I wonder if my cousin knows."

"Yeah, well Miss Star better hope Sade don't find out. You know how she is. Her and Kev ain't been together in a hundred years and she still wanna act a fool when he with somebody else."

"He must like 'em crazy."

"I guess so, girl."

"So what's going on with you?"

## Photo Shoot

Star and I were sitting at the bar having another cocktail when she said, “Oh my God! Did I tell you I hooked up with Kev?”

“What?? When??”

She beamed slyly. “Last weekend.”

“How did this happen?”

“Omygod, I was so drunk! We were all drinking at The Tavern and I went outside to smoke and he was hanging outside. We started talking. He gave me a shot of the bottle they were drinking outside. And then he came in with me and we had another shot. The next thing I know, we’re making out and he’s asking if we can go back to my place.”

I’m incredulous. Not because I’m surprised that Star hooked up with some guy. I’m gagging because she hooked up with THIS guy. Kev is one of the guys we know from the block. He occasionally works the door at the local bar but was most often found hanging outside with the other local fellas, drinking Henny and talking shit. One other thing to note about Kev is that he is 6’9 and must weigh close to 300 pounds, all muscle. He’s a giant!

She continued, it was wild!”

“I fucking bet! He’s huge!”

“He sure is.”

We both laughed at that.

“Really?” I asked, “You know I like my tripods. I always heard that big guys weren’t big where it counts.”

Star was busy with her phone. “No, you’ve gotta see this.”

“You’re kidding! You have pictures??” I squealed, leaning in to see her phone. She watched me for my reaction. I tried to be cool but my jaw dropped. Star was delighted.

“It was SO big. I never saw anything like it.”

“Neither have I. Cheers to you!” I raised my glass.

“I’ve only ever seen anything like that watching porn. I had to take pictures. Nobody would believe me. You should have seen Daria’s face when I showed her.”

“I can’t believe he let you take pictures.”

“It’s not like he’s got anything to be ashamed of.”

“You just whipped out your phone and started snapping pics and he was okay with that?”

“No. I took these while he was sleeping. This is morning wood, Baby! He said no when I asked, but there was no way I wasn’t getting proof of this.” She laughed, clearly pleased with herself.

“My first mandingo!” Star continued, “I had to document it. Otherwise, what’s the point? It’s not like I plan on dating him. He’s not coming home for Thanksgiving. It’s more of a fetish.” She was oblivious and kept going. “It’s no big deal. He should be proud and want to show it off. I’m just saving him the trouble.” She beamed.

Star prattled on. Friends of ours came in and I used their entrance to make my exit. Star didn't really mind me leaving though she insisted that I stay. She had a new audience.

## Good On Paper

Letty sat alone at the table, a glass and bottle of wine in her reach. Both were near empty. She had been sitting for some time and the room was dimming gray around her. Her gaze was steady but didn't seem to focus on anything at all. The sound of the elevator gave her a start. Was it Steven? Not yet. A glance at the clock told her that she didn't have much more time, however, before he would arrive home. She poured the rest of the wine, quickly finished the glass, then sat for a moment longer before heaving herself up with a deep sigh. Steven didn't like her to drink so much. The bottle would have to be buried deep in the recycling bin or he would nag.

Her phone chirped as she cleared the table. A text from Jade. "It was great seeing you today. I've missed you. I hope you can make it next Saturday." Letty smiled. She already knew that she wasn't going to accept the invitation. It would be too much. Today was hard enough.

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Letty was coming out of the UPS store when she heard her name called in that unmistakable voice. "Hey, Letty!" And then Jade was standing in front of her with that big smile of hers.

"Hey, Jade." They hugged. "What are you doing around here?"

"I just looked at an apartment up the block and was on my way to the subway. How about you?"

“Oh, I was just running errands. I live around the corner, on Bedford. So you might be moving to the neighborhood too” Letty’s voice stayed even despite her alarm. She didn’t think she could handle her ex living close by.

“I still have other apartments to see. The one I just left was nice but it’s a little more than I want to pay. How do you like it around here?”

Letty didn’t know how to answer. She didn’t want to lie to Jade—Jade would know if she did anyway—but she didn’t want to encourage her either. Still she found herself saying, “I love it. If you have time, we could have lunch at one of my favorite local spots. It’s right over there.”

“That sounds excellent. Let’s do it!”

The cafe wasn’t very busy. They chose a table by the window and settled in. After placing food and drink orders, they caught up like old friends, each filling the other in on gossip about one acquaintance or another. They asked about each other’s families. They reminisced about things they did as a couple. Inevitably, they talked about their current partners. Jade was dating a woman that she met on a cruise and it was getting serious between them. Letty had Steven. Each of them claimed to be happy in their relationships. Letty wondered if she, alone, was lying.

It had been a year since Letty and Jade had last seen each other, two since Letty had ended their relationship. Jade thought that they could stay friends. After all, she was friends with all of her other exes. Letty had heard this about lesbians but Jade was the first woman she had dated, and her ex boyfriends were best left forgotten.

At the time of the breakup, Letty's conservative dad was terminally ill. "Please, Letty, for me, find someone to take care of you. I won't have peace til I know that my baby girl will be alright. Find a good man and settle down and have a family. Jade's a nice girl but that can't last forever. It's time to grow up, Baby".

Her dad didn't take her relationship with Jade seriously. To him, it was just a phase that Letty was going through. Letty knew different. She knew that she had never been as happy with anyone else. She had never felt more like herself. Still she acquiesced. She convinced herself that her dad was right. So she broke up with Jade and set her sights on finding "a good man." By all accounts she had done so with Steven, at least on paper.

It's not that she was unhappy with Steven—always Steven, never Steve and absolutely not Stevie. He was a great guy. Afterall, isn't that why she was with him? He offered her the secure and stable life that she had been taught was desirable. Her life was nothing if not stable. Steven was dependable and took his role as "man of the house" seriously. He was a "stand-up guy" who took good care of her. He could be overbearing and annoying but nobody's perfect, right?

Steven nagged a lot these days. He didn't want her to drink too much, or laugh so loud, or go out with her girlfriends as often as she did. He had a new critique every other day and was feeling less like a partner and more like a second father she didn't need. He hadn't always, not before they moved in together, anyway. They were so caught up in each other, maybe she just hadn't noticed. Theirs had been an improbable "whirlwind



romance”, a mere seven months of dating before she moved into his apartment. Lucky seven, they joked.

Letty sat across from the woman who may have been her one true love extolling her current relationship and feeling like a sham. And a fool. Her father was dead and gone, having lived his life fully, in spite of the cancer. Would he really want anything less for his daughter? If he knew how much Letty loved Jade would he have the same wish? Would he be happy knowing that Letty’s stand-up, great on paper guy was gradually crushing her spirit?

Jade rescued her from her thoughts.

“Letty, this has been nice. Can we maybe do this again? I’m having a party at my apartment Saturday night. I figure since I’m moving anyway, it doesn’t matter anymore if I piss off the neighbors. You and Steven should come. You can meet Deya.”

“Yeah, I would love that!” Letty wondered if Jade knew she was lying.

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Letty looked at the clock again. Steven was due any minute. She went to the bathroom to freshen up, making sure to use mouthwash to mask the wine. She changed into a t-shirt and shorts and got into bed, having decided to feign a headache. Steven wouldn’t bother her then. Letty lay in bed thinking about Jade, her smile, their life together, and what could have been.

## The Visit

Tabitha found herself reliving the past. The memories were more intense being in her mother's house. They flooded through her, leaving her emotionally wrecked. She hadn't expected to be so overwhelmed although she knew this would be a difficult trip. She hadn't talked to Marta for years and hadn't seen her for longer than that. She had never visited her in this house before. But she felt just as overwhelmed as when she was young and trapped at home. She had been there for one night and knew that she had to get the fuck out of there.

It wasn't that Tabitha didn't love her mother. Who doesn't love their mother? The problem was that Tabitha didn't have a great mother. That could have still been fine. Not all moms are great, after all. It's hard work! Everyone is not up to the challenge. Tabitha's mother Marta certainly wasn't. She often chose violence. And that's what Tabitha couldn't forgive. When she was young, she had made excuses for Marta's behavior. Mostly she blamed herself, believing that she was a bad daughter. Adulthood and years of therapy had changed her view. She understood now that Marta was abusive. Nothing Tabitha said or did warranted her mother being as cruel as she was. Period.

Growing up, Marta told Tabitha that she wouldn't have any problems if Tabitha just listened and did what she was supposed to do. But no matter how hard she tried, Tabitha always fucked it up somehow, sending her mother into fits. Tabitha was a stupid bitch by the time she was ten. She could get smacked for saying the wrong thing. A broken dish or a forgotten mitten were reasons for Marta to beat Tabitha's ass. Tabitha had been choked, kicked and beaten with a belt. There was a week one hot July that she

had to wear pants and long sleeves to hide the bruises after she left her keys at a friend's house. She told everybody it was because their washing machine was broken. Heaven help Tabitha if someone accused Marta of hurting her.

Marta delighted in threatening Tabitha and taunting her. "I'm your mother! I'm the only one you can depend on. You think anybody else cares about you? Not your no good daddy! You better straighten up. I brought you into this world and I'll take you out of it! No court will condemn me." She said it so often and with such conviction that Tabitha believed it. How could she not? Nobody ever intervened on her behalf. Nobody ever questioned Marta. Various family members did tell Tabitha, however, what a great mom she had, how hard Marta worked for her, that she should try to do a little better and not upset her mother so much. Tabitha grew up understanding that she was only alive because of Marta's benevolence and should be grateful.

As a teen, she tried to be home as little as possible, staying with friends who had more chill parents. They all loved her, thought she was a good kid. When Tabitha earned a scholarship to university, it was a big deal to everyone except Marta. Her best friend's family took her to a celebratory dinner. Her grandmother even bought her a Coach purse as a reward, which Marta tried to dissuade her from doing. "You know she's gonna lose it, right?" Marta told Tabitha, "you ain't do nothing special. You only did what you was supposed to do."

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Marta's home health aide finished for the day, leaving Tabitha alone with her mother for the first time. Tabitha washed her face then took several hits off her vape to

calm herself. When she was composed, she went to check on her mother. Marta was awake.

“I was wondering how long you were gonna leave me alone in here.” If you weren’t looking at her, she sounded like the titan she had always been. Marta’s stroke had left her weakened. Her body was diminished but her voice was strong. And impossibly, she seemed meaner. “I had to damn near die before you would even come see me. That’s how you treat your mother, the person who took care of you your whole life and made you what you are.” She sneered at Tabitha. It was the face that Tabitha saw when she thought of her mother.

Tabitha felt hoodwinked. Her uncle had called her with the news a week ago. “Your mama had a stroke. I know yall have your problems but I thought you would want to know. She’s not doing good. Maybe you want to come see her.”

Tabitha had flown to Charleston expecting to find Marta frail and perhaps contrite. She hoped for contrition anyway. Marta was ailing but angrier.

“I need a bath. I didn't want that woman putting her hands all over me. Run me some water. Then you bathe me. I washed your ass enough times.”

Tabitha marveled at Marta’s seeming resentment at having to bathe her as a child. She felt herself getting emotional so she left to run a bath.

“It’s time for me to take my pills too!”

Tabitha added epsom salts and the foaming oils that make bubbles to the tub and made sure that the water wasn’t too hot or too high. She got a towel and bath sponge and put out fresh night clothes. She gave Marta her meds, not at all surprised by, “are

you giving me the right pills??" Then she helped her into the bathroom, out of her nightgown, and into the bath.

Naked, Marta looked even more feeble. Tabitha was careful not to bang her against the porcelain, which wasn't easy. Marta fought her, saying she could do it by herself when she clearly couldn't. Surprisingly, she relaxed once she settled into the water. "This is nice. I'm just gonna soak for a bit. You don't have to stay in here."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Tabitha! Leave me alone. Go!"

Tabitha could hear water splashing. After about twenty minutes, she heard Marta turn on the tub faucet so she went to look in on her. "You okay in here? Need me to do anything?"

"I don't need you to do a goddamn thing! You think I don't know how to give myself a bath?? I know how to run water!"

"I just wanted to help."

Tabitha felt a familiar knot in her throat as her eyes welled up. How could it still hurt so much? It wasn't enough to ignore Marta. She had tried. For years she avoided speaking to her mother. That didn't stop Marta from calling and leaving unpleasant messages. Or trying to contact her via mail. It didn't stop her from getting other members of the family to call on her behalf. "You should call her. It's your mother."

She resented these calls and became estranged from her family. Everybody knew how Marta was. Why wouldn't they understand? It was like Tabitha and her feelings didn't matter.

She peeked into the bathroom after not hearing much sloshing and splashing. She smiled. Marta was reclining peacefully, just a wisp of a sneer on her face. She breathed steadily. She noticed Tabitha.

“Okay. I’m ready now. I feel so relaxed. Wash my hair first. Use the organic shampoo.”

“Okay, Mama.”

Tabitha gently soaped her mother’s hair, massaging it into her scalp. She tipped Marta's head back, being careful not to get shampoo in her eyes. Tabitha lowered her head back into the water like a baptism. Suds floated around her face like clouds.

Tears burned in Tabitha’s eyes. “I have always loved you so much.”

“Well you should, baby. I’m your mother.” She squinted her eyes open a bit to look at Tabitha and she smiled.

“Yes. My mother,” Tabitha chuckled. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She lowered Marta deeper into the water, submerging her face and head.

## Ladies Lunch

Shayna was the first to arrive. She had never been to Chez Josephine so gave herself plenty of travel time to get there early. It wasn't the kind of place where she would normally eat. Too bougie. It was her cousin's favorite restaurant though, so here she was. She wasn't surprised to be first. Letty had made the reservation but both she and Tabitha were time challenged. She wondered who would be the latest and guessed that it would probably be her cousin. The story in the family was that Tabby was actually born on her due date and that was the last time she was on time. Sure enough, Letty's car pulled up next.

"Shayna!"

"Letty!"

The women hugged.

"Is Tabitha here?"

"Not yet."

"Let's get a drink at the bar while we wait."

They went inside and checked in with the host, who escorted them to the bar.

They settled themselves and looked at the cocktail menu.

"This is your first time here, right? The drinks are really good."

"I know Tabby loves it. Do you come here a lot too?"

"Occasionally. I first came with Tabby but I've had a couple dates here too."

They had just ordered drinks when Tabitha appeared behind them.

"Hey, ladies!"

“Tabitha!”

“Tabby.”

Tabitha hugged and kissed them both before greeting the bartender.

“Hi, Jean-Claude. How are you? May I have a Josephine’s kiss? You make them so delicious. Can I have it at our table? Thank you.”

After the women were ushered to their table and their orders were taken, they began to catch up.

“I’m so glad to be back. It’s so good to see you both.”

“It’s good to see you. How was your trip?”

“Oof, it was really tough. I had to get out of there. I did my daughterly duty by visiting her but it was probably the last time. My mother will never change and she will never be satisfied. I can’t be around her and feel safe, so how can I help her? I’m only hunting myself. Folks make me feel like I’m fucked up for staying away from her, but keeping my distance is the best thing for me. And maybe for her too, to be honest. I still have a lot of anger. Thank goodness for my therapist.”

“Good for you, Tab. I was worried about you taking this trip. I know how long you have struggled with this. But it looks like you may finally have some peace.”

“I’m working on it.”

“Yeah. You’re gonna be alright, Tab. Aunt Marta was always a trip. I thought she would loosen up when we got older but she never did. She got worse. She stopped talking to me when I asked her to stop trying to check up on you through me. She did not like that. She cut me right off.”



“You’re better off without her drama.”

“Speaking of drama, I saw your friend Star.”

“Oh, you mean my best friend?”

“Letty, stop. You did? Where?”

“I was in Whole Foods and I heard somebody giving one of the employees a hard time. The voice sounded familiar. Sure enough, it was your girl.”

“What was she mad about?”

“Apparently, they didn’t have the cardamom dental floss she likes and nobody could tell her when it was coming in.”

“Cardamon dental floss?”

“Yup.”

They all had a good laugh at that.

“I swear some people don’t have real problems, so they go around looking for them.”

“Did she see you?”

“Fortunately not. I wasn’t in the mood for that.”

“I haven’t talked to her for a while.”

“Well she never liked me for some reason.”

“Consider yourself lucky.”

“Shayna, stop. I think she doesn’t like you, Letty, because you’re everything she’s not. A tall, beautiful, Black superstar with fame and acclaim. You are effortlessly cool.”

“Thanks, Tab. But you’re all those things too. She’s still your friend.”

“First of all, I have zero fame and don’t do half the fabulous shit you do. But you and I are really close and she and I will never be friends the way that you and I are. I think that makes her jealous.”

“She’s cool with Shayna.”

“She don’t have to be.”

“Shayna’s my cousin. I can’t help who my family is. Friends are different. You’re chosen. And be honest, you’re not a fan of Star either.”

“I don’t have anything against her.”

“I do.”

“Shayna!”

“I think she’s funny.”

“If funny means cunty.”

“Shayna!”

“What? You know I don’t like her. I think she’s fake and trying so hard to seem like she’s some cool, laid back chick when she’s really a tight ass bitch.”

“Tell us how you really feel, Shayna.”

They all laughed.

“Ooh! Guess who saw. Clayton!”

“Really? When?”

“I was just thinking about him the other day.”

“Remember I had that gig back home last weekend? He was there! I couldn’t believe it. He still looks good.”

“What’s he up to now?”

“He was with his wife, Min. She seems really nice. They have a four year old little boy, Jaden. Clayton works for Chase and Min is a real estate broker.”

“So they’re doing okay.”

“Yeah, they’re doing just fine. When’s the last time you talked to him, Shayna?”

“Obviously it’s been a while. The last I knew he was living with someone. I guess it worked out. Good for him. He always wanted that life.”

“He said that they will be in the city next month. I told him that we should all get together.”

“Yeah, that would be fun.”

“You cool with that, Shayna?”

“Girl, stop. I ain’t thought about Clayton like that since we were kids. Besides, I got my boo.”

“We know, Shayna. You love you some Louis.”

“How’s he doing?”

“He’s alright. He’s at home now watching the game with Rodney and em.”

“Well tell his big head I said I want my money from that game. I told him they couldn’t beat my team.”

“Okay, Cuz. I’ll be sure to tell him.”

“Well since we talking about boos and exes, I’ve been talking to Jade again.”

“You have? Since when? You didn’t tell me.”

“I’m telling you now, Tabitha. I ran into her a few weeks ago. We started texting, then we had lunch a couple times.”

“Wait. doesn’t she live with her partner?”

“They broke up a few months ago.”

“Alright, pimpin’. I hope you’re making moves to get back with her.”

“For real. Talk about the one that got away. You never should have broken up with her. I mean I understand why you did, but I always liked her and thought you guys were great together.”

“We’re taking it slow. I don’t want to mess this up again.”

“I hope it works out.”

“Me too.”

“Okay, I know you guys love this place but how long does it take for the fucking food to come out? I’m starving!”