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Open Doors

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Open Doors

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Nonfiction

By

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B.A. University of Maryland, 2009

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Abstract

This memoir is about community, family and race relations as the author experiences them in New Jersey, where she grew up, at University of Maryland, where she went to college, in Washington, D.C., during Barack Obama's presidency, and in New Orleans, where she lands in her late twenties. It is meant to shed light on the possibilities and beauty to be found in diverse, close-knit communities, where people share in each other's joys and sorrows. It also speaks to the importance of romantic partnerships in which both people share the same values, and explore and grow together.

Prologue

Who Dat?

November 2015
Passera Court, New Orleans

It was a lazy Sunday. Mitch was asleep on our old green couch and I sat at his feet, sharing his blanket. Outside it was warm for the season and overcast. The sun barely came through our orange mesh curtains, as it usually does in the afternoons. On our 24-inch TV the New Orleans Saints played the New York Giants. I hardly paid attention, but kept it on out of obligation – obligation to my neighbors and colleagues in New Orleans, to my family and friends in New Jersey.

Football wasn't big in my childhood home but it was in my mother's. My grandfather, who died before I was born, wore the same short-sleeve button-down every Sunday that the Giants played. Mom still keeps it in one of her drawers.

The announcers got noisy and I glanced up from my book. I went to turn down the volume but noticed the score: 49-42 Giants, with less than a minute left in the game. Just then, Drew Brees made a beautiful pass to a guy named Spiller, who I knew nothing about. Spiller ran it past the end zone. Touchdown. Damn! I thought and squiggled in my seat. Mitch stirred.

“Babe, you should see this,” I whispered and patted his leg, but he was deep in sleep.

Mitch grew up in the Washington, D.C. suburbs as a Redskins fan. He and his dad stand up when they watch the Redskins play. Every year, they believe – like really believe – that “this could be the year.” I've always wanted to believe in something like that.

The Saints got the extra point. The game was tied with 20 seconds left. The Saints' defense forced a Giants punt, and Brad Wing kicked it from their 25-yard line. A guy named Murphy, on the Saints, returned it across the 50. The Saints fumbled. But – oh my God! – Willie Snead, who had scored a touchdown for the Saints earlier, recovered it. Wing went to tackle Snead but got flagged, for a facemask, whatever that meant. I was giddy.

It was hard, living in New Orleans, not to be a Saints fan. Everyone else was: From the artists in the Bywater neighborhood, to the fancy Uptown folks, to the Yats who grew up in New Orleans East and the Creoles of Color in Treme. And then of course there were the city's African Americans, whose families had owned the same homes in the Ninth Ward or Gentilly for generations. Those neighborhoods were among the hardest hit during Hurricane Katrina, and many of those African American families (among others) had to sleep in the Superdome for the long, desperate week that followed the levee breaches. The Superdome was so much more than New Orleans' football stadium. And even to me, a post-Katrina transplant, every Saints victory still felt like more than just winning a game.

Kai Forbath, just signed to the Saints from the Redskins, the announcers said, came up for a 50 yard field goal. Fifty freaking yards, with just seconds left. I gasped when his foot made contact with the ball. It soared through the poles. The Saints won 52-49.

"Holy shit," I whispered to myself. I looked down at Mitch, desperate to share the moment, that kick.

And then I heard it, from the porch next door.

"Who dat?" my neighbor Miss Janice yelled in a raspy voice. "Who dat? Who dat sayin dey gonna beat dem Saints?"

And then my neighbors Tosha and Sarah and Abbie's mom from all the way down at the corner: "Who dat? Who dat? Who dat sayin dey gonna beat dem Saints?!"

I jumped up and ran for the door. Bob across the street opened his at the same time as I did. We yelled, "Who dat?! Who dat?! Who dat sayin dey gonna beat dem Saints?!"

Miss Janice cackled, and everyone met in the gravel road. All of us ladies, besides Bob. All of us wearing black and gold, besides me.

“Thank God,” Tosha said. “I thought I was gonna have to take a ride to give Robbie some space if they lost.”

“Did you see that kick?!” Abbie’s mom bubbled.

“Yeah, baby,” Miss Janice said. “That was a hell of a kick.” Then she turned to me. “Girl, you gotta get you a nice shirt.”

“You’re right,” I said, and I thought of my grandpa.

Part One
Open Doors

1996-2016
Woodbridge, New Jersey

I grew up in a house with an open door. *Open*, meaning we didn't lock it, and people came and went as they pleased. People, meaning my cousins, aunts and uncles, the kids from the neighborhood, friends from school, Mom's students. One morning when I was 13, we found Jimmy from down the street sleeping on the porch. He was a year younger than me. His mom had just died and his dad was an alcoholic, getting worse by the day.

"Jimmy!" Mom shrieked when she saw him. "Why didn't you come inside?" The next night he did. And the next. Jimmy slept in the family room that whole summer.

The house was in Woodbridge, New Jersey across the street from the train station, and a 40-minute ride from New York City. It was built in the Victorian style more than 100 years before Mom and our stepdad Michael bought it in 1996. The house was beautiful, but always under construction, always being rearranged. That was Mom. She needed a project, whether it was helping a kid or repainting the living room with fake cracks on the walls, so it looked like Venice. We all helped on that one, the cousins and the neighborhood kids. We each still know which crack to claim.

My mom lived 30 miles from Venice, in Vicenza, Italy for eight years. Vicenza is where my dad is from. I was born there and we lived there until I was two. Then we moved to America, to New Jersey, into the home where my mother grew up – just two miles from the house with the open door. They had my beautiful baby sister Valerie there.

Based on their passions, my parents were soul mates – musicians, travelers, and progressives. But they lasted just eight years in America. Wired by his regimented, Italian upbringing, where there were strict gender roles, Dad had expectations, including lunch at 12:30

and dinner at 6:30. Mom didn't care when or what she ate, or if the house was clean. After they divorced, Dad remained prominently in our lives, but they'll both give most of the credit to Mom for raising us.

During that summer when we painted the living room with fake cracks, the cousins would sleep over a lot. We would stay up late and Mom, a night owl, would cook pasta for us at 2 a.m. Mom is short and blonde, with light blue eyes and a space between her front teeth. And even though her petite frame didn't suggest it, back then she was strong as hell, too. The cousins dubbed Mom "crazy Aunt Janey," and my friends called her "Janet from another planet." She was restless and creative. We couldn't fit her into a mold.

Mom, for example, liked to go food shopping after 11 p.m. because there were no lines then, and the guys stocking the shelves played classic rock. She started college to become a high school history teacher when I was in third grade (she was the first in her family to graduate) and she often took my sister and me, then eight and six, to class. Mom wasn't a good cook and she certainly couldn't bake because that required following directions. Once, when I was in high school and she forgot to pick me up from ballet (a regular occurrence), I walked into the house to see her small frame on the living room floor, cracking tile with a sledge hammer. Her blonde bob shot back as she looked up and winced.

"Did I lose track of the time again?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry. I'm just..." she tried to explain. "I'm making a mosaic for my bathroom!"

The mosaic, of pink roses with long, wiry, light green stems, is one of my favorite details in the house today. Mom loved roses. Rose is my middle name and my sister's middle name. Our

first dog as kids was named Rosie, and our second, Sophie Rose. When I asked Mom why, she shrugged. “I like the flower. Don’t you?”

As unpredictable as Mom was, there was one thing she did consistently: she helped. Mom helped Jimmy and a lot of other neighborhood kids. She bought food for them, and when we were in the basement playing video games for too long, she took us out on hikes and to the beach. It was around that time that her students started visiting too. Kids with long t-shirts and hefty fake-gold chains would sit at our long dining room table in chandelier light (the chandelier was actually from Venice) having tea, while she talked to them about applying for college and investigated who was selling what drugs.

The bad kids came for tea. The good kids with bad luck came to live with us. That was the deal my stepdad Michael – a Jewish carpenter – my sister Val and I came to accept. It happened because after taking in the neighborhood kids, all of whom went to the high school where Mom taught history, Mom got a reputation for being an emergency contact for the kids who didn’t have one. When I was 16, for example, she got a call from one of the high school janitors, who had found the football star, Shamar, sleeping in the locker room. Mom announced that Shamar would be living with us, and for the next three months I brushed my teeth next to a 6’ 3” black kid who prayed before he went to bed.

I never prayed. For as kind and generous as Mom was, she used God to scare us. “That’s what God does,” she would say when we got what we deserved. Never mind that she had a variety of religious symbols on display in the house – crosses, menorahs during Hanukah for Michael, and several statues of the Buddha. Culturally, Mom was Irish Catholic. Meaning that culturally, she was obligated to instill a healthy dose of guilt in us.

Culture, race or ethnicity was never a factor in deciding whether a kid would live with us, but once he or she started sleeping in the spare room, it wasn't ignored. Mom encouraged us to talk to one another about our experiences and she moderated these discussions, at the dinner table, in the car, on the porch while drinking coffee, with great enthusiasm. We talked about food and religion, we talked about racism and poverty. We shared. And it became evident, every time, that we were more similar to than different from to the people seeking refuge in our home.

A year or so after Shamar left, Johnny came and stayed. Well, eventually he went to college, but then he came back. Johnny is Dominican. He is a few years younger than me, but my sister knew him growing up as the kid who'd gotten stabbed in middle school, one town over. With my sister in Philadelphia, and me in New Orleans, these days it's just Johnny, Mom and Michael in the house, in addition to three wildly disobedient dogs: Franklin Roosevelt, Teddy Roosevelt, and Charlie Rose.

When I tell stories about Mom to my neighbors and friends in New Orleans, they get attached to the kids she helped. They ask what happened to them. Whether they made it. Some did and some didn't, but really, there are just too many of them to keep track. Every once in a while, one or two of the good kids with bad luck, the kids who lived with us, will come for dessert during the holidays. Last year, Shamar stood outside with a pie on Christmas night and rang the bell. When Mom answered, she said, "Why didn't you just walk in?"

"Miss Engel, all you can see are my teeth out here," he said and laughed. "I didn't want to scare you."

And while everyone who hears the stories asks about the kids, few ask what happened to Mom. Mom is tireless. She is a guidance counselor now, and after receiving more than \$100,000 in grants, she started an alternative night school for her students who are most at risk of failing

out. These days, though, Mom does most of her helping within the school system. It took her a while, but she found boundaries. Now, at the end of 2016, when I talk to her about being involved in my own community, she warns me to find boundaries, too.

“I know you enjoy everything you’re doing with them,” she’ll say, “but you will enjoy it more if you make time for yourself, too.”

Mom also wants to sell the house, to downsize, she says. There is a heroin epidemic in New Jersey now, and many of the kids who used to come for tea are addicts. She gets nervous. They know where she lives. They know she has nice things that they could sell.

“Do you lock the door?” I ask her.

“Not really,” she says. “I forget.”

September 2008
University of Maryland

On the first day of my last year at the University of Maryland, I walked into a basement classroom in one of campus's older buildings and sat in a squeaky desk. The class was called "African American Visual and Material Culture." I minored in African American Studies as an undergraduate, and in most of those classes, about half of the students identified as black, and a quarter as white. This class was no exception.

Our professor was Dr. Cheryl LaRoche, an African American anthropologist who, when she wasn't teaching, dug up and studied the bones of slaves, which she found in mass graves across the country. Petite and fit, she wore a pant suit that first day of class, and her long hair was in braids. Dr. LaRoche greeted us as we walked in, and after we were seated, she leaned her back against the front of her desk and crossed her arms. The room was poorly lit and it seemed she was examining us. She nodded, walked over to the classroom door and closed it. Turning back around she said, "We're going to have a lot to talk about this semester." It was the semester that Barack Obama would or would not be elected our first black president.

A class of about 20, we went around the room and introduced ourselves. Immediately after, Dr. LaRoche projected our first assignment onto the wall: a print of a man with dark skin, walking in front of a white estate on a large plot of green land. The man wore dark blue jeans and a white tank top, and there was symbol on his arm that looked like it had been burned there. Dr. LaRoche asked us to take out our notebooks and write exactly what we saw. She asked us not to make assumptions, but to write plainly what this was a picture of. The class fell silent and got to work.

In college, I wore black Converse sneakers, a t-shirt and jeans to class every day. My hair was long and brown with bangs, as it still is, and I could have stood to lose 10 pounds, as I still

can. In college, I majored in journalism because I loved writing and wanted to bring attention to injustice through story telling. I minored in African American Studies because I felt passionately about civil rights. That was because of Mom and our house with the open door.

In class, after 10 minutes of our looking at the picture and jotting down notes, Dr. LaRoche told us time was up.

“So let’s see,” she said, leaning on her desk again. She did not sound snide or skeptical, but matter-of-fact.

“Who wants to tell me what they see?”

Several people raised their hands. She called on a young white woman.

“I think it’s somewhere in the South, based on the landscape,” the woman said.

“Okay.” Dr. LaRoche nodded. “Anything else?”

The girl said it looked like a plantation, that maybe this was a modern man in front of a historic landscape.

“Anyone else?” Dr. LaRoche asked. She called on a young white man now.

“I think he’s probably in a gang based on his tattoo,” the man answered.

Dr. LaRoche nodded. Another white student was nodding along with her. She pointed to him.

“I was thinking that too,” he said. “But is it a tattoo? It doesn’t really look like it.”

The week before the semester started, an African American friend of mine pledged a black fraternity called Omega Psi Phi. On initiation night, his brothers branded his arm with a red hot iron in the shape of the Greek Omega.

“Dude, what the hell happened to your arm?!” I had asked when I saw him. And he explained that it was a tradition, probably rooted in African tribal traditions and also nodding to

slavery, when slaves were branded. Whatever the case, it meant sacrificing to be part of something better, sacrificing for brotherhood. Omega was the first black fraternity to be founded at a historically black university (Howard, just a few miles from University of Maryland) in 1911. Being an Omega was prestigious. When black people saw the brand, they knew what was up, he said.

Sitting in Dr. LaRoche's class, I knew the man in the picture was in a prestigious black fraternity. I saw some of the black students smiling at the presumption that he was in a gang.

"Anyone else?" Dr. LaRoche asked. She called on an Asian woman, who too agreed the man was probably in a gang. She said the picture showed "modern urbanism against its rural history."

More nodding by Dr. LaRoche, more smiling by the black students. It was like they had met before class and planned it all out. I sat puzzled over whether I should speak up. I felt a pang of obligation to show the class that not all white people were clueless, though just the week before, I was sure I would have pegged the man as a gang member too. I raised my hand. Dr. LaRoche pointed to me.

"I think he's in a fraternity," I said.

She raised her eyebrows and tilted her head.

"Why do you say that?" she asked.

I explained that my friend had just joined Omega. That he got branded. "I never knew it was a thing until last week," I admitted.

Dr. LaRoche smiled now.

"Okay, now let's hear from some of the others in the class. Who thinks this man is in a fraternity?" she asked.

Every black student raised his or her hand. “Right here,” one of the guys said eagerly. She called on him. He lifted up his shirt sleeve and showed his Greek Omega brand. He explained it was tradition, sacrifice, a life-long brotherhood. It was prestigious.

Dr. LaRoche let the room fall silent for an uncomfortable minute.

“This is what we call cultural schema,” she finally said. “Gang member versus fraternity brother.”

She let it sink in, then continued, “So now I want you to think of the inner-city high school student who is taking the SAT. This student sees the analogy: A yacht is to a regatta. It’s not that he can’t make out that analogy. It’s that yachts and regattas aren’t within his cultural schema...

“This class is called African American Visual and Material Culture,” she said. “What will happen in this class is this: we are going to devote three hours each week to expanding our cultural schemas. We’re going to close that door, and talk about everything that we might not have the opportunity to talk to each other about out there: racism, politics, culture and your personal experiences. The students who do not identify as black in this class are going to do a lot of listening. And you will also be encouraged to ask questions. This is a safe place and we are going to fill it with dialogue.”

I knew then that Dr. LaRoche would be the professor I’d never forget. I knew that her class would keep me on my path, that it would inform and strengthen my convictions.

Mom

I was about seven years old. I was born in '59, so that would take me to '66, right in the height of it, and I remember watching the news with my dad. And it wasn't just one time. It's a really vivid memory, so I think I was watching it a lot. And it was before news became sensationalized, so it was like, real live coverage.

I saw these little girls, they were my age, and the firemen were hosing them down and they were flying because of the water pressure. They were just like flying across the street and crying. And I saw police dogs – the policemen were holding the police dogs – and they were scaring the kids to move back. And I didn't understand why the fireman and policeman, who I had always been taught were my friends, I didn't understand why they were doing that. And I asked my dad and he said, "Well, some firemen aren't our friends." He said, "Sometimes there's bad people." I wasn't really sure how to think about that because my uncle was a fireman and he was always talking about saving lives.

Pop Pop was ... Even though Pop Pop was a staunch Republican, Pop Pop and Mom Mom grew up on 100th Street in Manhattan. He grew up in a white, Irish Catholic neighborhood, but behind his neighborhood were the Puerto Ricans. And behind the Puerto Rican neighborhood was the black neighborhood. And as my father got older, a lot of his friends, they were on the next block and they were Puerto Rican. And we used to call them uncles. I had Puerto Rican uncles. And of course within the Puerto Rican community there are always people of African descent. So there was not really a... I don't think that they were racist, my parents, but I think that they were taught that you just didn't, you know, we kind of lived in a separate world. But I know that my father was empathetic. At least from my perspective. I think he kind of knew that it bothered me a lot, so he kind of was gentle as far as race was concerned. Even in high

school, I would talk about the Native Americans and he would give me books to read, like Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, and Chief Joseph. So he recognized that I was sensitive and he kind of nurtured that.

There were some really racist people in our neighborhood though. I remember, I guess I was in high school, when the first black family moved into the development. Their name was the Browns. They bought the house, right? And the man across the street from us went door to door, and was trying to ban them from moving into the neighborhood. And so he came to our door and my father invited him in and he was like, "What's up?" And the guy was like, "Well, you know, there's a black family moving two doors down from your house." He was like, "You're going to let that happen? You're going to let your property value go down?"

And my father just looked at him and he goes, "Get the fuck out of my house." And he goes, "As far as I'm concerned if anyone can afford to pay the taxes, they can live here." And that was like... my dad never said the N word or the F word, and that was one of the few times that I heard him say it. "Get the fuck out of my house." So that's what I mean. Even though my parents were ... they were from Manhattan, so they grew up seeing a lot. They weren't your typical Jersey people who weren't integrated, because they saw a lot of stuff. Still, if you were black or Jewish or even Italian, you were "not like them." They could've been ... they were a little racist against all of those people. But not Spanish people, ironically enough, because I had all those Puerto Rican uncles.

November 2008
University of Maryland

On November 4, 2008, Senator Barack Obama was elected the first black President of the United States. My roommates and I hosted a party in our apartment to watch the election results. We crowded in our pre-furbished living room, drinking cheap beer on bulky couches, chairs and the floor. I was beside myself with excitement with every state we saw turn blue. I was riveted by the coverage while the others talked and moved around. I had been wearing my Obama pin for almost a year. My class with Dr. LaRoche had become completely obsessed and consumed by the election.

I still consider that semester in Dr. LaRoche's class to have been one of the most intimate experiences of my life. The African American students shared stories that I will never forget. Stories of grandparents who took coolers of food on road trips, because they were not used to being able to stop in places; of a brother who was a surgeon in Atlanta, and whose white patient called him "boy"; of an aunt whose house burnt down in Philadelphia, after the government dropped a bomb on a controversial group of black activists next door to her, and then made the call to "let the fire burn." That was in 1985.

Some of my classmates had been victims of violent racism, and others had experienced it regularly in smaller ways. They explained to us what it felt like *not* to have white privilege. What it felt like as a kid, to not be represented in magazines or on TV, to not have black babydolls, to have parents who'd been victims of redlining and predatory bank loans. A lot of us who were not African American asked questions – Dr. LaRoche made it so that none was allowed to be considered offensive, so long as it was genuine.

That Tuesday, as the map of the United States turned more and more blue, it felt like our class was about to elect Obama, as if we willed it so hard that we were about to make it happen.

And in small part, that was true. The energy among young people in the 2008 election was unprecedented, and it showed in our voter turnout. It was the first time I, at 21, was able to vote. I teared up in the booth. I understood how much was at stake.

The thing was, some of the people who were in my apartment on election night did not seem to understand what was at stake at all. Most of them were white, and most had voted for Obama, but with the exception of my roommates, several didn't seem to be very invested in how it all turned out. Some were from conservative families and thought a win by Republican Nominee John McCain would have worked out just fine. I resented these people, but kept my mouth shut, betting on victory. Finally, McCain conceded. After a brief thank you, he said: "This is an historic election, and I recognize the special significance it has for African Americans and the special pride that must be theirs tonight." My tears began to fall, and one of the women in the room, a friend, turned to me and laughed. "Why are you crying?" she asked. I didn't know what to say.

After listening to Obama accept the nomination, I left the apartment and went down to Route 1, College Park's main street, where hundreds of students were standing in the street with drinks, chanting "O-BA-MA." I met with some friends from Dr. LaRoche's class. "What do you think she's going to do tomorrow?" one of them asked our group. We were eager to find out.

The next day, I took the Metro to my internship in Washington, D.C. reeking of whiskey. Strangers greeted one another, we smiled and said hello, we gave up our seats. At one point, I stood next to a little black girl, about three years old, and I felt like I could explode with gratitude. This little toddler would come into awareness having a black president. Having a black family in the White House would be normal to her.

That afternoon, Dr. LaRoche came to class a few minutes late, as we sat waiting impatiently to see her. Eventually she walked in, again in her pant suit, and without looking out at us, she turned and put her back to the class. She lifted one hand and said, with a cracked voice, “I’m gonna go all Miles Davis on y’all today.” We burst into hysterics, all of us laughing and crying, even the guy with the Omega brand. We’d done it. We’d elected the first black president.

December 2011
Woodbridge, New Jersey

The first time Mitch came to the house in Woodbridge was December 31, 2011. It was before we'd ever kissed. We'd met about a month earlier in D.C., where we both lived in what many called an "up and coming neighborhood." We met through a mutual friend, at a running club, which I attended exactly once. When we realized we lived around the corner from one another, we started hanging out a lot – going on hikes, out to bars, we'd even get high and watch "Planet Earth." But Mitch wouldn't make a move.

I liked him for it. I was fiercely independent then, and I resented the traditional way these things went. Mitch was mild mannered, but unafraid of my whiskey drinking and political ranting. He was a good listener and he got along with my many guy friends. He was also brown, though I had no idea what his heritage was. I knew, whenever we'd get to talking about his experiences, he'd have interesting things to say.

So on December 31, 2011, when Mitch texted and asked how I was spending New Year's Eve, and I was still in New Jersey visiting my family, I wrote back, "You should come party with me in the Dirty Jerz!" I never thought he'd take me seriously. He was three hours away.

But then that beautiful man on the other side of the satellite wave, or whatever makes cell phones work, wrote: "Really?"

And so I wrote, "Yeah, definitely."

A few hours later, Mitch showed up at the open door and knocked. I opened it. He stood there looking sweet and nervous, wearing a backpack and a cradling a bottle of wine for my mom.

"This never happens," I whispered.

He smiled and asked, “What do you mean?”

“No one is home.”

That night, in Hoboken, surrounded by blowout hairstyles and girls (including my best friends) drinking Redbull-vodka, Mitch kissed me when the ball dropped. We slept on my friend’s apartment floor together, holding one another, and I remember feeling vulnerable but not unsafe. I remember feeling excited about a boy for the first time in a long time.

The next day, Mom and I took Mitch to see the neighborhood. We took him to Seawarren Bay, across the Outerbridge from Staten Island, where the water is lined with smoke stacks and huge oil tanks. We took him to Riffy’s, the neighborhood bar, where so many of the people I grew up with happened to be hanging out. They weren’t visiting family. Most of the girls had gone to college and moved back near Woodbridge. Most of the boys didn’t go to school, but rather followed one of three paths: They enlisted in the military and/or became cops in or near Woodbridge; they learned a trade (most were longshoremen or pipe fitters); or they became utterly lost in drugs.

It wasn’t until college that I came to realize that Woodbridge was a working class neighborhood to its core. I noticed this when the kids who used to come for tea started acting like I was some kind of superstar simply for getting out of New Jersey. I observed Mitch carefully to see how he’d react to these people – my people. I had a feeling he’d grown up with money, based on the places he’d talked about traveling to as a kid. Mitch was warm and easy. Smiling his big smile. Acting like Riffy’s was the best bar he’d ever been to.

“So, he’s not your boyfriend?” Mom whispered, leaning over on her bar stool. I could tell she was impressed. We were both sipping Jameson on the rocks. “Then who is this guy?”

I shrugged. "I honestly don't even really know," I said.

We laughed. "Well, I like him," she said.

"I think I do too."

Part Two
Finding Home

Mitch

What I look like depends on the time of year... I know my mom, actually, when we were little ... I liked being tan and being in the sun, but sometimes she was like, "Oh but you look more like my kids if you're a little lighter." Because she always got the worst questions when we were growing up, you know? Like strangers would come up to her and be like, "Oh they look so healthy, where did you get them from?" And she's like, "my womb..." I guess if we didn't look so dark, maybe she thought that people would believe we were her kids more. Especially with Serena and me. Farin was more believable, but Serena and I get so dark.

I remember I was probably five or six, and I don't know exactly what provoked me to say it, but I was like: "I'm so glad I'm brown." I was at Gram's, and you know, Gram is white. I remember my cousin Brooke being there and Gram, and I just remember them making these funny, goofy faces after I said that. Their faces were kind of just like, like they thought it was hilarious. They thought it was funny that I would say something like that.

There are many times when I feel uncomfortable. If I'm going to a place that's really rural, I assess it. Am I going to be judged super hard now? You know, like in West Virginia, Western Maryland, down here. Is it safe for me to drive across Mississippi and break down? I don't know. Like I would love to do a bike-across-America trip, but is it safe? If I was a white guy, maybe I could go up to some random farmer in Kansas and be like "Hey can I sleep in your barn?" But I don't know if I can do that. I don't think I have the freedom to do that. Like I could try it and they might say yes, but I'm not going to do it with the same free smile as if I didn't think they were going to be racist toward me.

I do think that the more I've gotten to places I'm afraid of, like Mississippi and Alabama, the more I learn that there's good people everywhere and there's bad people everywhere. And there are a lot of racists up North. Racism exists in the North just as much.

May 2012
New Orleans

Mitch's face has an oval shape. His thick, black eyebrows, which I often rub a finger over to tame, match the short, coarse hair on his head. Mitch's forehead is broad. His eyes are deep-socketed and dark brown. They are seductive. Framed by noticeable circles and crows' feet, it seems his eyes hold his 31 years worth of secrets and experiences.

The tight skin around Mitch's jaw line, his light facial hair, and his wide but delicate smile, however, defy his age. His lean but muscular build does, too. Mitch is 5' 11'' and 170ish lbs. In the summers, his skin is dark brown – darker than many African American people's, but with a slightly redder hue. In the winter time, he is dramatically lighter, but not mistakable for someone of solely Anglo-European descent.

Mitch's dad is Sri Lankan, but was born in and immigrated to the United States from Malaysia as the son of a diplomat. His mother's ancestors were likely from England, but immigrated to America so many generations ago, that no one knows exactly how long they have been here. Many of Mitch's maternal ancestors sided with the Confederates during the Civil War. His grandfather was named Robert Edward North, likely after the Confederate General Robert. Edward Lee. I don't remember the first time I asked Mitch "what he was" or if those were the words I used. I do remember the first time I realized he got that question a lot. It was during our first trip to New Orleans together, at the Exxon at Lee Circle, in the heart of downtown. It is called Lee Circle because a statue of the general stands at its center.

Like so many activities I sought out in the beginning of our relationship, the New Orleans trip was a test: Could Mitch keep up with me? I had a fascination with New Orleans, where I traveled frequently for my job in Washington. Its colors and sounds captivated me, but its people

were who I thought about for months after each trip. I daydreamed about conversations I had in cabs and on barstools about Hurricane Katrina, second lines, the magic of Mardi Gras. The generosity with which New Orleanians could bear their souls to a total stranger amazed me. The spirit of the place, soaked in creativity and openness and appreciation of culture, reminded me of Mom. It reminded me of home.

In D.C., a few weeks after that first kiss in New Jersey, I stopped by Mitch's on my way home from work one day and announced I wanted to go to Jazz Fest in May. We still weren't exactly dating.

"Want to come?" I asked.

"Sure," he said.

Game on, I thought.

We arrived on May 3, 2012. Our first stop was the Exxon gas station store. Our host, Brandon – a local I'd kept in touch with from one of my work trips – kicked open the door with his elephant skin boots. His heels clacked fast over to the liquor aisle as he yelled to Mitch and me, who were trailing behind.

"Y'all, New Orleans goes so hard, you can buy everything you need to make an Old Fashioned in the gas station." He stopped in front of the Jim Beam like a soldier ordered to attention. Mitch and I filed next to him. Brandon swept his brown hair away from his eyes and made an open-palmed gesture to the whiskey.

"And y'all, we can literally make the Old Fashioneds right here and then walk outside and drink them on the street," he said.

"Let's do it!" Mitch said, looking at Brandon like he might an older brother.

Brandon nodded and marched away from us, determined to find our twist of citrus. Mitch followed with quiet, turned-out feet. He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “They even have bitters!” he said softly, his eyes wide.

We got the ingredients and stood in line to check out. The possibilities of Jazz Fest Weekend 2012 seemed limitless. We were a Deep-South trio for the books: The Cajun, Louisiana native, the Irish-Italian Jersey girl; and Mitch. Mitch had never been to New Orleans, and I had described it to him as romantically integrated – a place of togetherness and acceptance, of anything goes. Our trio seemed to fit right in. The fact that a symbol of segregation stood tall and illuminated just outside the Exxon, or that New Orleans once had the largest slave port on the continent, was lost on me.

Waiting in line then, our arms full of Old Fashioned ingredients, a memory we still laugh about was made. An African American kid who looked like a mini version of Cee-Lo poked Mitch on the shoulder.

“You Indian?” he asked. Mitch shook his head no.

“You Mexican?” Mitch shook his head again.

Brandon and I watched in amazement. Baby Cee-Lo put his tiny finger on his itty bitty chin.

“You black?”

“Nope,” Mitch said with a grin.

We got called up to the register and Cee-Lo quit guessing.

August 2013
Washington, D.C.

On the night before the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, Mitch, our friend Dustin and I went to dinner near the Archives Metro Station. Apt to taking advantage of the free events D.C. had to offer together, we had been attending lectures, services and concerts commemorating the March all week. We had a lot to talk about that evening: Jewish people's role in the event; how it focused as much on jobs as equality; and the incredible number of marchers who, at great risk, had taken busses from all over the country to participate. Most remarkable to me, though, was the victorious nonviolence of the thing. More than 250,000 people, at such an intensely troubled time, channeled their collective fury and fear into peace. How could it have been so?

I don't remember what we ate that night, only our energetic discussion about how much had changed and how much had stayed the same. After dinner, we decided to visit Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself. To pay our respects and reflect on his greatness.

We finished our meal late, past 11 p.m., and rode our bikes to the Tidal Basin, where his memorial had been erected not two years before. Since then, I'd taken to calling him "the Big Man," because his position, etched into a mountainside of white stone, staring out over the water of the Basin, indeed made him feel larger than life. He seemed close to God. In the still, clear summer night he looked especially powerful. The only light at the memorial shone on his image and his words, which, carved into black marble walls, made a semicircle perimeter around him.

The three of us wandered quietly around the memorial, each pausing at the quotes that struck us most. In 1959, at the Youth March for Integrated Schools in Washington, Dr. King told his young audience to, "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for

equal rights. You will make a better person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in.” I stood in front of that quote and thought about it for a while. I wanted desperately to do this, but how was it possible when I had to work a paying job? My mom would say to start small – to connect and know and be good to my community. But in D.C., my diverse community was segregated. By day, it teemed with black residents at Rite Aid, outside of the sneaker shop, and at the bus stops. By night, white hipsters descended, populating bars like the Rock and Roll Hotel and the Argonaut.

“Hey, guys,” Mitch broke our silence. “I just got an email from my dad that links to Martin Luther King’s full ‘I Have a Dream’ speech.”

“No way!” Dustin replied, and we all walked toward the Big Man, meeting at the center of the memorial. “Can you read it to us?”

Mitch started aloud:

Fifty years ago today I arrived for the first time on the shores of the United States of America as a wide-eyed, 13-year-old kid who had never been outside the protective borders of a multi-cultural country, Malaysia. We spent our first two days in America at the Fairfax Hotel that was located two blocks north of DuPont Circle on Mass. Ave., N.W. Two days after our arrival, we were sequestered into the residence of the Malaysian Ambassador to protect us from a possible racial backlash from the impending March on Washington. As a 13-year-old who grew up in a country where all races lived together in harmony, I did not understand discrimination, nor did I consider the fact that my skin was dark to be of any consequence.

Three days later, I can still remember sitting in front of the first TV set I had ever seen in my life and watching the speech of Martin Luther King, Jr. on that fateful day in August 1963. I will never forget how moved I was to hear him speak of his dreams for an America of equality,

hope, justice and prosperity. This speech had a major influence on my perception of America. His speech is still a valid dream for America.

His speech is 17 minutes long. Please take a moment out of your busy life and listen carefully to this speech. It is one of the most important and moving speeches in American history. There is still a long road ahead for true equality and justice amongst the races in America, but the dream for America that MLK spoke of in this speech is still valid.

I have inserted the link to a web site that has the original speech in its full-length. Please listen to it when you get some time. Let me know what you think. Share it with your friends if you wish.

Love, Dad

I was already crying.

“Well, shit,” I said and the boys laughed at my tears. “We better get comfortable and listen to it.”

We lay down next to the Big Man like a three-point star, with our heads nearly touching. We put Mitch’s phone in the center and I closed my eyes. Dr. King’s voice boomed into the warm night air as we basked in the light of his memorial.

“I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation,” he started. Dr. King spoke about the Emancipation Proclamation and how 100 years later, the *“Negro still is not free.”* He talked about the *“fierce urgency of now,”* an urgency I still felt, 50 years after that. And even about *“our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today... (who) have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom.”*

And then, after all that, he talked about his dream. “And so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream,” he said. “It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.”

“I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’

“I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

“I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

“I have a dream today!

“I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of ‘interposition’ and ‘nullification’ – one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

“I have a dream today!

“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; ‘and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.’

“This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.”

All of us were crying then.

After growing up in Woodbridge, being shaped by my time at the University of Maryland, and witnessing segregation every day in my Washington, D.C. neighborhood, I had become intensely passionate about civil rights. I had come to terms with the fact that I was that friend, that white friend, who after three glasses of wine, couldn't keep her mouth shut about education and job inequality, the prison system, and for God's sake, slavery. It was tiring and frustrating being that friend, but that night I felt justified and invigorated. And I knew that even though Mitch and Dustin often laughed at how vocal I was, they felt the "urgency of now" too. Now, what next? I wondered.

A year later, after we'd moved to New Orleans, I heard Mahalia Jackson singing on the local radio station, WWOZ. She was featured during the Sunday Morning "Gospel Show" segment, and I listened, moved and entranced, while driving down Carrollton Avenue in Mid City. I don't know what song WWOZ played that morning, but whatever it was, the power of Jackson's voice in those few minutes made me feel like I had spent all week tending to my soul. According to the DJ, she was the Queen of Gospel, and that was easy to believe. I had to know more about her, so back on Passera Court, where we lived, I researched.

I soon discovered that to understand Jackson, I had to understand where she came from: a riverfront neighborhood in New Orleans that the city now calls "The Black Pearl." Formerly plantation land, the Black Pearl first developed in the late 1800s.¹ At that time, most African American residents – many of them freed slaves – worked as domestics in mansions lining St.

¹ *Neighborhood Profiles Project*, "Black Pearl," City of New Orleans Office of Policy Planning and the City Planning Commissions, 1980, 3.05.

Charles Avenue, while local Irish, Italian and German immigrants ran groceries and barrooms, or worked the wharves.² Jackson was born here in 1911. She lived in a single shotgun house with twelve others, and as a child and teenager, she sang in two neighborhood churches: Mount Moriah Baptist, a bright pink, brick building, and Plymouth Rock Baptist.

Jackson's family and neighbors called their area "Pinching Town," implying that unlike the comfortable residents of nearby "Pension Town" (today's Carrollton neighborhood, where retired black soldiers settled), they instead were pinching pennies.³ Others in Jim Crow New Orleans called the neighborhood "N- Town." It was from this foundation that Jackson sprang to the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement.

Jackson became a close friend of Dr. Martin Luther King, and in 1963, she sang at the March on Washington. Following her performance, as Dr. King read his prepared speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Jackson's shout changed history. The night before, King had met with advisors in the Mayflower Hotel in DuPont, not far from where Mitch's dad was staying that night, and he heeded their suggestion to take out the "I have a dream" language from his address. At the March, Jackson listened to several minutes of his speech, and then she urged him to speak from the heart, instead of reading his script. "Tell them about the dream, Martin," she yelled. He moved his script to the side of his lectern, and he did.⁴

² Laurraine Goreau, *Just Mahalia Baby: The Mahalia Jackson Story* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1975), 16

³ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴ Dave Walker, "Witness Recalls Role of New Orleans' Mahalia Jackson in Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' Speech," NOLA.com and the *Times-Picayune*, Aug. 23, 2013.

January 2014 Washington, D.C. to New Orleans

During the first week of January 2014, Mitch and I went on our last date as residents of Washington, D.C. We'd be moving to New Orleans on January 10. Both of us had gotten jobs. Mitch was staying with his company, Siemens, but would be promoted to the position of energy engineer. I would be working at Tulane University in the Development, or fundraising, department. The move was my idea. I had encouraged Mitch to look for a transfer, had convinced him that New Orleans would be the adventure we were looking for.

After dinner and some live music, Mitch and I rode our bikes home to my 250-square-foot apartment. A long emotional month, full of goodbyes, was finally coming to an end. I had spent all holiday season carrying on, doubting my decision to leave the friends I worked so hard to find. Making friends in D.C., where many relationships were self-serving, had been difficult. Finding people whose handshakes and eager eyes didn't ask, "What can you do for me?" took commitment. When I found my people, they became family.

While I wallowed in self-doubt, Mitch was more reserved. In just a few days, he'd be leaving the area he'd grown up in. Leaving his family. Uprooting for the first time. The fact that he had so little to say about it was driving me crazy.

"Do you even want to do this?" I'd asked him tens of times.

"I wouldn't be doing it if I didn't want to," he'd say.

But that was all he'd ever say, and I interpreted his quietness as nervousness. And I wondered if his doubts stemmed from moving away, or from moving away with me.

Back from a somewhat strained date night, we went upstairs and on my bed there was a gift bag.

“What’s this?” I asked, surprised.

Mitch smiled and shrugged. “Better open it and find out.”

Inside the bag was a Café du Monde coffee tin. I laughed. “Oh awesome,” I said. Though I wondered how we were going to get through that much coffee in just the few days before we moved.

“Open it,” Mitch said.

“The coffee?”

He nodded.

The tin was light weight, and I soon realized, full of tissue paper. I peeled off the plastic lid, and on top of the tissue paper there was a necklace. I lifted it. A nickel with the fleur di lis carved into it dangled from a silver chain.

“Oh my God,” I said. “How did you...Did you carve this?”

Mitch laughed. “I watched a lot of YouTube videos,” he said. “And I practiced with the jewelry saw a bunch of times before I did it on the nickel.”

“What’s the nickel?” I asked, overwhelmed.

Mitch explained that on New Year’s Eve two years earlier, the night of our first kiss, he flipped a coin to decide whether he would come to New Jersey.

“I flipped it twice, and it landed on the wrong side both times,” he said. “Then I just said, screw it, and I came anyway. It’s been in my wallet all this time.

“I think some things should be left up to chance, but that sometimes you have to decide what you want. And I *want* to move to New Orleans *with you*,” he said. “I want to have this adventure together.”

The web of knots in my neck and shoulders, months in the making, released. I melted into Mitch with eager openness. We made love in my tiny room. I was free from angst and doubt and self-righteousness. I was ready.

Two days later, Mitch and I soared over Lake Pontchartrain in a Budget Truck, with the New Orleans skyline in sight. Mitch, who had started the 18-hour drive in the 18-foot vehicle with clumsy handling, was now owning I-10 like a bona-fide road warrior: switching lanes, blasting the stereo, speeding South. It snowed as we left D.C., but it was warm now.

I stuck my hand out the window and let the wind carry it up and down.

“Woohoo!” Mitch yelled over Lyrard Skynard and pointed to the buildings.

I looked over at our Buddha statue. He stood between us on top of a cooler bag with his usual, jubilant, expression. I rubbed his fat belly. “Yeah, sweets!” I yelled back.

Everything was ahead.

We got off of the interstate and within a minute or two, we saw our neighborhood for the first time. We had found our house through a local realtor, and Brandon and his girlfriend Laurel had gone to look at it for us. They said we had to move there because it was close to a big park and right near a Mardi Gras parade route. We heeded their advice.

Nearing the house, there were cemeteries everywhere. Stone angels atop above-ground tombs waved us down the street. Eerie, I thought, but beautiful too. We turned right at Ike’s Snoball stand, and a few blocks down we saw a corner bar with no sign, just a green awning and lights. The big park was nowhere in sight. The road got gravelly.

We found Passera Court. Potholed and muddy, it was a one-block street lined with double shotgun houses, some in better shape than others. We crept past a white one with red doors. It was to be our new home.

Mitch parked at the end of the street, just 100 feet from our house, next to a brick yard that glowed red in the sunset. An old warehouse with broken windows ominously spanned the entire block behind us. He kept his hand on the gear stick and broke the silence.

“Looks like this is it,” he said.

“Let’s go find the park before it gets dark,” I responded. The park would help.

We hopped out of the truck, pulled up Google Maps on our phones, and bee lined it toward City Park Avenue, holding hands, full of nerves. The sun was setting fast, but I could see majestic oak trees ahead.

“That way,” I said. We walked in silence, quickly, to the trees.

There was a whole grove of those fairytale oaks. Their limbs were long and sprawling in every direction, dripping with Spanish moss, backlit by the dusk. We weaved between them in awe, like we had discovered a new world, an ancient world. And we had. A plaque announced that one tree was 800 years old. Mitch seemed to be breathing again, his shoulders lower, his hand less fidgety. The trees made us feel small, insignificant. They had seen it all.

Brandon and Laurel came to welcome us as soon as we called. In the muggy dark we unloaded our belongings, and enough peanut butter, plastic cutlery, and tuna to last us 18 months – I know because it did – which Mitch’s mom had snuck in the truck. Our side of the shotgun house was 800 square feet – bigger than any place I ever imagined living in – and it even had a garage. What order did we want the rooms in?, Brandon and Laurel asked. With all of them in a row, and basically the same size and layout, we had to decide: living room, dining room,

bedroom, kitchen? Bedroom, living room, dining room, kitchen? Etc. Etc. We decided on option A. I paced a lot. Mitch wore his nervous smile and fumbled around. Brandon and Laurel did most of the work. The least we could do was treat them to beers.

And so we drank Abitas on the outdoor courtyard of the Bull Dog, a local bar, and Brandon talked excitedly about everything we would do in New Orleans – that weekend, the next month, the next year. We laughed and clung to every word of our only local friends, until I couldn't keep my eyes open another minute.

It rained that night. The thunder was long and lingering. It shook the fragile house. The walls were bare and the room was cold. We didn't have heat or hot water yet, so we slept close – nervous and with boxes all around us.

The next morning the sun shone through our makeshift curtain-sheet, and a Terradactyl-sounding bird cawed so loud I thought it might have been in bed with us. I shot my eyes open. Mitch was already awake, grinning.

“A dinosaur lives next door,” he said.

I laughed. “Let's go find it.”

We hurried outside. It was 65 degrees and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. We discovered the bird must be coming from the yard of our neighbor. We saw an African American boy and white girl, both about seven, playing in the street. They opened the car door of an old, parked Mustang and sat in the driver's seat and passenger's seat. A white guy in his 40s appeared next to the car. He had been working underneath it.

“Hey guys,” he said, and I knew he was a northeasterner. “I'm Micah. And this is Abbie and RaHji.” He gestured to the kids climbing over the center console into the back.

“They’re the neighborhood kids,” he clarified. He knew we just moved in. “You’ll get to know them soon.”

“We’ve already been in your house!” Abbie said through the cracked window of the backseat.

“Yeah, we helped paint it,” RaHji chimed in. “We been in everybody’s house.”

Micah laughed.

“It’s true. These two run the block,” he said. “You must be hungry, right?” he asked. And then he sent us off to what he promised was the city’s best Italian bakery, Angelo Brocato’s, just down the street.

As we started on our walk, RaHji got out of the Mustang and said, “Hey, Mister, what’s your name?”

“I’m Mitch” Mitch said.

“Well, you look like a light-skinned Obama.”

We all laughed.

“Well, thanks.” Mitch replied. And we headed toward the cannoli.

Part Three
Passera Court

Mom and Miss Janice

Mom: So I'll start.

Miss Janice: Ok go head.

Mom: Ok, so I came down here after Maggy had just moved in, and I said I was going to help her to decorate the house. So I rented a car, and I went shopping and she left the key in the mailbox. And I got home, and I didn't go to the bathroom before I left the store, and I had to go so bad, and I couldn't get the door open. So I'm standing there fiddling with the key, fiddling with the key, and then Mr. Bob from across the street was standing there watching me.

Miss Janice: Heh heh heh Ha!

Mom: And Miss Janice says...

Miss Janice: I walked up, I walked up, and she in your door, and she was tryna get in. So I just stood up there for a little minute, ya know, let her keep doin it. She kept doin it, she kept doin it. Then I said, "Baby." I said, "I don't think you're gonna get in there. You must have the wrong key." She said, "Nooo, nooo. We came in this way this morning, and it worked." But I said, "Guess what? I was here when they were fixin on the house and they had problems with the door then, right?"

Ok, so she say, "Oh, can I use your restroom, can I?" Didn't know her from a can a paint. I said "Come on baby, you can use the restroom." ... She came in the house and after she used the restroom she's like, "Oh it's so nice up in here." And I said "Ok."

Mom: You have such a nice house.

Miss Janice: So we went outside, and I said "Come on, let's try it again." She tried it again and it didn't work. So I said, "Where's Maggy?" She said, "Yeah, I better call her, so she can come open the door."

Mom: Then Mr. Bob comes over.

Miss Janice: Oh shit, we were...Ha!

Mom: And Janice is like, "Bob, this here's Maggy's mom."

Miss Janice: Yeah.

Mom: "She's the new girl that moved in."

Miss Janice: Yeah. I never met you. I don't think I met you then. Oh yes I did. We met ya. But it wasn't really, you know.

Mom: And then Mr. Bob came over and he tried to get in.

Miss Janice: Yeah. He couldn't do it. So I said, "You must have the wrong key." She said, "No, this is the right key. We came out here this morning, we came out the door."

Mom: But then I don't remember what happened?

Miss Janice: You had to call her. She came.

Mom: Oh yeah. And then we started hangin out. We went shopping.

Miss Janice: Yeah. She asked me to go shopping with her to get you some stuff for the house.

Mom: We went to Home Depot.

Miss Janice: And then after I did that I said Lord I don't know this lady from a can a paint, she could do me somethin or somethin, ya know? I don't know this lady.

Mom: Then her daughter was yelling at her, because she said, "Mom, you don't know her."

Miss Janice: It was India I think.

Mom: "You don't know that lady. She can just steal you."

Miss Janice: Yeah. Yeah. But it didn't go like that though.

Mom: She's like, "She's not gonna steal me"

Miss Janice: It didn't go like that.

Mom: So then we shopped around and went all over.

Miss Janice: Mmhmm.

Mom: And then we just hung out and became friends.

Miss Janice: Yup.

Mom: And now it's like every time I visit. This is my fifth time down here Janice.

Miss Janice: Look at that, fifth time. Can't stay away.

Mom: And then I introduced you. I said, "This is my daughter Maggy."

Miss Janice: And she said, "Take care of my baby, hear?" And I said, "Girl, I got her, I got her."

February 2014
Passera Court

I saw our neighbor Miss Janice outside on her porch after work one day and I invited her in. I hadn't seen her since my mom's visit to New Orleans the week before. The two of them had hit it off, and just watching them together was entertaining. At 55 years old, they are just one month apart. Miss Janice can't be more than 100 pounds, and while mom has curves to her these days, she is still petite. For as small as they are, they filled every room they walked in with laughter and energy. And they went a lot of places together. Mom and Miss Janice went shopping for everything Mitch and I still needed for the house – curtains, floor mats, a coffee table – and I figured Miss Janice would want to see how the place turned out. I really liked her, and I hoped we could get close with her. Inviting her in without Mom being around seemed like a good next step.

“Well, golly,” Miss Janice said as she walked inside the living room, examining the orange curtains and the teal rug. “Your mom said they was gonna fit together. I didn't know about that, but it came out real nice.”

“You like it?” I asked. “I really do too.”

“Yeah!” she said with a laugh. “That's real pretty. And these curtains too!” She walked farther in the house, to the dining room, and inspected the décor.

“Yeah, come on in,” I said, and walked her toward our bedroom. Mitch heard us from the kitchen, where he was making breakfast for dinner.

“Hi, Miss Janice,” he yelled.

“Oh hey, Mitch!” she said, and she followed me toward his voice. “Girl, he's so fine,” she whispered.

I laughed. Mom had told me that Mitch's good looks were one of their favorite conversation topics.

"How's it goin, handsome!?" Miss Janice said when we reached him, shirtless over the stove.

"Pretty good," Mitch said. "You like the house?"

"Of course I do," she said with a smile. "I helped pick all the stuff out, you know!"

Miss Janice walked around the kitchen, continuing to look around.

"Now what's this?" she said, holding the corner of our calendar, a full calendar of Mitch's family, which he made for them as Christmas presents. The February photo pictured all of them together: him, his two sisters, Serena and Farin, his mom and dad, and their beloved Golden Doodle, Kodi.

"He makes that for his family every year," I told Miss Janice with my eyebrows up, like, can you believe that?

She laughed. "You got a nice and handsome man here, baby." And then she paused.

"So who's this?" Miss Janice pointed to Farin, who has fairer skin than Mitch and their younger sister.

"That's my older sister," Mitch said.

"And that's your dad," she pointed. "And that's your sister too?"

"That's right," Mitch said.

"And how about this?" Miss Janice pointed to Mitch's mom.

"That's my mom," he said.

"This here's your mom?" she asked again.

"Yeah," Mitch said.

“Ohhhhh!” Miss Janice said emphatically. “Well that’s okay, baby. We all got a little something extra in us.”

We all laughed. I had a feeling we’d be close with her after that.

March 2014 Passera Court

Brandon and Laurel were right. We were near a Mardi Gras parade route. Endymion, which rolled down Orleans Avenue, was a bead's throw away. Everyone said it was the season's biggest parade, but Mitch and I had no idea what that meant. It wouldn't roll until around 4:00 p.m., but the party started well before. Technically, it started two nights before when people set up tents on the neutral ground (the grassy area in the middle of the street, which I had always called the median) to claim their spots. We poured ourselves mimosas at 11 a.m. that Saturday, and headed out front.

Our tiny corner of New Orleans had never looked so busy. Visitors wearing purple, green and gold schlepped from far-away cars with lawn chairs and coolers. They waved merrily as they passed. Next door, music was blasting at the Dennis family's house. RaHji and Ra'Saan's dad, Robbie, peered into his steaming boil pot, pensively.

"Just wait," our neighbor Gay said as she walked by with her dog, Izzy. "He's an amazing freaking cook."

Robbie looked up and smiled at us. Tosha, Robbie's wife and the boys' mom, was dancing and greeting people on the porch. They showed up by the car full: cousins, aunts, uncles and friends, all with their kids. RaHji was beside himself with excitement. Screaming and sprinting around the street, greeting the neighbors, bringing us together. Abbie was right there with him, quiet as usual.

Robbie piled a boiled crab, sausage and corn onto a styrofoam plate as his extended family watched with hopeful eyes and hungry bellies. They had been waiting for this all year. He

looked around and began walking toward us, dressed in a purple polo and hat, for Mardi Gras, but for Warren Easton High School too, where Ra'Saan played football.

Robbie reached our stoop and handed the plate to Mitch, to everyone's surprise. We liked the Dennises, but in our short time on Passera, we had definitely talked to RaHji the most out of all of them.

"Hey, man," Robbie said. "This is y'all's first Endymion right?"

"Yeah, it is," Mitch said, and extended his hand. Robbie slapped and shook it, smiling wide, holding the plate steady with his other one.

"You wanna see if this is ready?"

Mitch looked around at everybody watching him.

"Do it so we can eat Mr. Mitch!" RaHji yelled.

"Yeah, sure," he said. "I mean, are you sure?"

"Course I'm sure, man! Come on and eat it."

Mitch grew up eating crabs in Maryland, and this crab was damn good, he said. The sausage and corn too. The family dug in, and they brought plenty of plates over to us. "Get in on it, y'all!" Tosha said.

We did. And once we ate, we got in on the Jim Beam, and vodka, and Abita and Miller Light. Eventually Brandon and Laurel showed up with friends. The scene – all of us dancing, drinking, laughing together – felt warm and familiar. The spirit of Passera seemed to be that if you had, you shared, and if you didn't, people had your back. We had landed ourselves in a real community.

When the parade kicked off, we said our goodbyes and set off for the spectacle. “Y’all be careful!” Tosha warned from her porch. The woman was still dancing. She’d been at it all day. “It gets crazy over there after dark!”

Endymion’s theme was “An Evening at the Opera,” and massive floats had *Carmen*, *Madame Butterfly*, and *Don Giovanni* décor. More than 2,800 anonymous riders threw millions of beads, sometimes full bags of them, at the screaming audience. We weaved through the crowd on Orleans Avenue, blocking our heads with our arms, to the house of Brandon and Laurel’s friend, Jen.

“Y’all!” Jen yelled and hugged all of us when she made it to her gated front yard. “Welcome to Jendymion! All ya need to know is kids in the front, drugs in the back.”

For two hours, we stayed in Jen’s front yard, separated from the mass of people who stood on the sidewalk in front of her fence, and yelled, “Beads! Beads! Beads!” at the floats. “Make eye contact!” Laurel advised. So I did, and I caught everything my heart desired: stuffed animals, light-up toys, spears, go-cups galore.

“I never thought I would want all this shit,” I yelled to Laurel. “But now I feel like I *need it!*”

“Ha! I know,” she yelled back, keeping her eyes on the flying goods. “I know it’s ridiculous!”

Night fell, we got drunker, and the crowd on the sidewalk in front of Jen’s yard seemed to get more aggressive. There was a shift in the energy. The beads hit my fingers with a little more force. The riders looked scary, their white masks glowing in the lights of the float. Their hats, flat and with a drape that covered the back of their necks, looked wrong. Their anonymity reminded me of the KKK.

“So what’s up with the costumes?” I asked Laurel.

She shook her head. “Crazy, right? And Mardi Gras was segregated until not that long ago.” Laurel explained that the city still even had a black krewe and white krewes on Mardi Gras day. “New Orleans is a weird place,” she said.

March 2015
Gretna, Louisiana

The story of Robbie and Tosha's fateful night starts like so many others: They were in Jefferson Parish. They were in the same Jefferson Parish where in 2003, the prosecutors made national news because of the ties they wore to court, often on the days when they sentenced black men to death. Cameron Mary's tie had a six-inch noose on it, outlined in black. Donald Rowan's pictured the Grim Reaper. The ties were handmade gifts from another prosecutor's wife.⁵

So Tosha and Robbie were in Jefferson Parish, just across the Mississippi River from New Orleans, and they were sitting in a parking lot outside of a birthday party for Juvenile, the rapper. Robbie was a plumber, but did security work for the music business on the side, and they got invited. While sitting in the driver's seat, Robbie took out a blunt wrap. Two cops saw him do it, and they stormed the car. They handcuffed Robbie and Tosha and they searched the car, which was registered under Tosha's name. Underneath Tosha's seat they found \$250 worth of weed and crack-cocaine. They charged my neighbors with intent to distribute.

Robbie and Tosha were both 40. When Robbie was 20, he had another petty drug charge. Because of this, and because the car was in Tosha's name and the drugs were found under her seat, their lawyer said they had two options:

1. Robbie could plead innocent and get 15 years in prison, while Tosha would be sentenced to five.
2. Robbie could plead guilty and get five years in prison, and Tosha would walk.

Robbie would plead guilty.

⁵ Gettleman, Jeffrey. "Prosecutors' Morbid Neckties Stir Criticism." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 04 Jan. 2003. Web. 15 Sept. 2016.

October 2015
Passera Court

There were six Jack-O-Lanterns in all, two to a step, lighting the way to Miss Janice's porch. The kids, Miss Janice and Sarah, who lived on the other side of Miss Janice's double, had been working on them for several hours. So had Tosha and Robbie, who organized the annual contest. Robbie's court date would not be until January, and during the fall months, the neighborhood followed his and Tosha's lead and largely ignored his fate. Instead, we enjoyed the time we had and continued our Passera Court traditions, like the Jack-O-Lantern contest. Robbie was a talented artist, and he had been coaching RaHji for the win that night. The only question was, with so many biases, who would be the judge?

Mitch and I hadn't been home all day and everybody decided that as a non-participant, and as the fair person we knew him to be, it would be most appropriate for Mitch to judge the contest. There was one problem: Mitch's voice is very soft. And the rest of ours aren't.

Mitch walked up and down the porch stairs examining the pumpkins slowly. One had a fleur de lis carved into it, another a bottle of wine and a wine glass. The others had faces, one with jagged, scary teeth and a blinking light, and another with big X's for eyes, and a hat. Mitch paused to admire the little toothpicks holding up the round top and stem of the pumpkin. I could tell it would probably be his winner. He came down the steps and stood on the sidewalk.

Everyone was yelling: *Look at those teeth! What's that supposed to be? Check out that detail!*

Mitch cleared his throat.

"This is tough," he said into the darkness from the sidewalk. No one on the porch turned toward him or stopped talking, except Tosha.

“Let me help you,” she said, and came down to the sidewalk. While Robbie is on the shorter side and compact, Tosha is tall and curvy. She wears her hair long and wavy, and she has round cheeks and a big smile. Tosha also has a voice that I often hear from next door. It’s hard not to pay attention to Tosha.

“Okay,” she yelled. And the crowd snapped their heads in our direction. “Mitch said it was a hard decision.”

“Very hard,” Mitch repeated from behind her.

“But the first place,” Tosha yelled.

“Is the hat,” Mitch said.

“The first place goes to Sarah,” Tosha said.

“Yay!” Sarah squealed, and I chanted, “Sarah! Sarah! I totally agree.”

RaHji looked down at his sneakers. He walked to stand next to his dad.

“For second place,” Tosha yelled. And then she turned backwards to Mitch. “Who’d you vote for second, Mitch?”

“I like the flashy light one actually,” Mitch said.

“The flashy light for number two!” Tosha repeated. “That means number two goes to Paisley.”

“Yas!” Paisley, a little girl from around the corner, screamed. “I got second place!!”

“And the third place goes to...”

Mitch pointed to the fleur de lis.

“Third goes to RaHji,” Tosha yelled.

RaHji was as close to his dad as possible now, staring at the ground.

“They all were really good,” Mitch said.

“I aint gonna lie to ya,” Robbie said. “This was my pick.” He sauntered to the steps and chose two others for first and second, and then RaHji’s for third again. RaHji’s eyes welled up with tears. His pumpkin wasn’t even his dad’s favorite.

Robbie backtracked. “All of them are beautiful. And they all got their own theme,” he said, talking just to RaHji now. “So guess what? Everybody wins. Everybody wins! It’s a Passera Court thing.”

Everyone laughed but RaHji, whose tears were hitting the dusty road now.

“I just like what I like, dude,” Robbie said, louder now. “You mad with me?”

He pointed to the fleur de lis. “I did that with you and you think I don’t like it?”

RaHji sniffled and kept his head down.

“I just give props where it’s due,” Robbie went on. “You have to give people their due in life. Everybody don’t do as well as others in certain things. They won. You came in third place. You’re good.”

January 2016
Passera Court

The morning before Robbie's court date was hot and humid for January. I was on the Canal Streetcar riding to my office in the Central Business District when Tosha texted me.

"I need help Mag," she said. "We need to write a letter to the governor, and to the president."

I slunk down on my wooden seat. "You're right," I replied, though I knew that neither the president nor the new governor was going to care about my sweet neighbors. I hated to see Tosha so desperate.

"I can't let this go," she continued. "My spirit won't let me."

"I'll try to figure out the best people for us to talk to," I wrote back.

The streetcar stopped at Marais Street, French for "marsh," and I weaved carefully to the front. As soon as the yellow doors closed behind me, I picked up the pace. I bolted past the HEAL Garage, where the attendant was held at gunpoint the week before, at 8:30 a.m. I thought about the shooting that happened just two weeks before that, in front of the nearby Walgreens, in the middle of the workday. The crime in New Orleans was getting to me. I felt nervous all the time.

But violence was one thing. Drugs – I mean drugs at a party, or drugs amongst friends – were different. As if she read my mind, Tosha texted: "You know killers go for 20 years and they wanna give Robbie 15?"

"The new Jim Crow," I wrote back.

"Yes!" she responded. "Put that in the letter!"

Across Poydras Street from my office, the clouds hung low over the Superdome. It would pour later, I was sure. On my way inside I made a mental outline of what Tosha, what we, were looking for.

After Robbie went to prison, Tosha would need a community of people who understood. She would need to feel purposeful and would want to fight the system. She would need money. A lot of money. RaHji was just nine, and Ra'Saan was 16.

I suddenly felt stunned. I remembered being RaHji's age and my dad taking me to a protest in New York City. It was after my parents had split up, and I was spending the weekend with him. The group was protesting the fact that a political activist was being forced to give birth in prison. I can't remember her name or what cause she was fighting for, and my dad doesn't either. I only remember the posters of her pregnant belly behind bars. I remembered feeling sad for the baby, thinking about what it would be like to have my mom or dad in prison. My mom was furious when she found out where we had been. "She's too young," she'd yelled at my dad. RaHji was too young, too.

At this point on Passera Court, we said often that we loved each other. We gushed about how lucky we were, marveled at how diverse we were, almost every Sunday night on someone's porch. We did favors for one another. We cooked, babysat, and shared washers and dryers. But with Robbie away, we would all have a lot more responsibility. We would have to walk our gushy talk – to support Tosha emotionally and financially. Would I be able to handle that? I wondered. This problem of having someone I love go to prison seemed too scary, too hard, for me. I knew that Mitch and I were likely the only two on Passera who were dealing with it for the first time.

Inside my office building, on the 11th floor, I sat at my computer without taking off my coat. I Google searched the Louisiana Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and emailed the outreach coordinator with the same language I gave the judge in my letter of support. Robbie is an amazing father. He goes to every football game, helps with homework, signed RaHji up for music lessons when he didn't want to play sports. Robbie is a dedicated husband and neighbor. He is always cooking for us, always lending a hand. The boys and Tosha need him. Passera Court needs him.

“We have all long been frustrated by racial profiling, unfair crack versus cocaine laws, and how many resources are wasted on locking up nonviolent criminals,” I concluded my email. “Tosha and I want to get involved in a local advocacy group that is working hard to make change in these areas, and we would appreciate any recommendations you have on where to start.”

I copied Tosha. “I am so grateful for you,” she wrote back. “I'll come over tonight so we can work on the letter.”

I let out a deep breath and took off my jacket. It was going to be a long day.

Tosha came over after work. She worked as a paralegal in a law office downtown. We sat in the first room of our shotgun, on my green couch with ripped lining. She looked beautiful as always. Her hair and make-up perfectly intact, and still wearing her work clothes — dress pants that fit her curves just right and a button down blouse. The red front door was open—it was still warm and sticky out—and we saw Miss Janice walking her Shih Tzu, Sassy.

“Janice!” Tosha yelled from the couch.

“Oh hey, y'all,” she said and walked to the stoop. She stopped at the top stair. Sassy barked. “Shut up Sassy,” she yelled. “Damn.”

Through the screen door, as she smoked her cigarette, Miss Janice started talking about our other neighbor Sarah – a white 20-something, like me. Apparently Sarah was in trouble with the restaurant where she worked as a server. She was taking the blame for something that was going on staff-wide, and it was going to be really bad. Sarah was going to need some help over the next couple of weeks, Miss Janice said, because “God knows” her boyfriend was useless.

Tosha already knew everything. She and Sarah were close. Robbie’s lawyer was going to help Sarah, she assured us. And Robbie was going to go pick her up later that night.

“The poor baby,” Miss Janice said. She flung her cigarette behind her and walked inside.

I shook my head and aimlessly reached for a package that I hadn’t opened yet, sitting near the door. I tore at the tape with my nails.

“I’ll go pick her up dinner at Rouses,” I said.

This situation was strangely cathartic. All of us being able to think about something other than Robbie. All of us feeling useful, like we had some control or way to help. I opened the box. My white majorette boots were in there. I took them out.

Tosha and Miss Janice burst into laughter, Tosha’s high-pitched, Miss Janice’s low like any smoker’s, but always with the emphasis on the second ha. Like, ha-HA!

“What’re those, Mag?” Tosha asked through her giggles.

“I’m in a Mardi Gras parade,” I told them with a grin. They found this hilarious.

“I swear, anytime I need a good laugh, I just gotta hang with you,” Tosha said.

“What you doin in the parade?” Miss Janice asked. “Any black girls in the group?”

I thought about it. “No, actually. Just a bunch of nerdy white girls like me. We dance.”

“Baby, you gotta show us the dance!” Miss Janice said.

“It’s to that song ‘Uptown Funk,’” I said. I pulled it up on YouTube, cringing. There was no way they were going to let me out of it.

I put my phone, our YouTube source, on the coffee table and marched in place. One, clap, three, clap, five, clap, seven, clap. One, clap, three, clap, five, clap, seven, clap.

“Oh, here she go!” Miss Janice yelled.

I marched through the living room and into the dining room, fingers pointing, shoulders bouncing, hips dipping down and around. I was committed. They already knew this white girl could dance. They always said so on Miss Janice’s porch. I needed to uphold my reputation.

This hit, that ice cold

Michelle Pfeiffer, that white gold

This one for them hood girls

Them good girls, straight masterpieces

They clapped and hollered. Sassy barked.

“Ooooh she likes that part!” Tosha yelled when I blew her a kiss.

“Alright, that’s enough,” I said about half way through. “You get the idea.”

“Yeah, we got the idea baby. We might have to come see you on St. Charles!” Miss Janice said. I turned off the music.

“You wanna go to Rouses?” I asked Miss Janice. I knew Tosha would need to go home to the boys soon.

“Yeah, shit, why not?” she said and looked at her slippers. “Let me just go put on my shoes.”

We never wrote the letter to the president or to the governor. I wondered if this was a failure on my part, if I was already not delivering what Tosha needed.

At the Rouses' hot food bar I asked Miss Janice about Sarah's boyfriend as she checked the price on every pre-prepared mash potato box.

"It's fine," I said. "I don't care about the price. But so what's his deal? There will be legal fees right? He's not going to help her?"

Miss Janice threw the cheapest package in my basket. "He's mad at her. He's all judgmental-like."

"Seriously?" I asked

"Yeah, and I'm not surprised. I hear what goes on over there," she whispered. "It's bad."

I stopped to look at her, trying to understand what she meant.

She widened her small eyes, looked straight into mine and turned toward the chicken. It was really bad, I guessed.

"And you know, she's like you. She ain't got no family here." Miss Janice gets loud when she's emotional, even if wants to be discreet. "So you know what I'm thinkin, is that this thing at work happened so she'll leave him, so she'll feel like she has to go home," she yelled.

Sarah is from North Carolina. "You think she'll leave?"

"I don't know," Miss Janice said. She arrived at the Rotisserie chickens with her finger in the air and her back to me. She got louder: "But it don't make no sense for this to happen to Sarah, unless it's that big man upstairs telling her to get away from here."

She picked up a chicken to eye level and spun it to examine it on all sides. "You think she'll like lemon-pepper?"

"Yeah," I said.

"You think the big man upstairs has something to do with Robbie?" I asked.

She put the chicken in the cart. “I don’t know, baby. You know, you do the crime, you do the time. But Robbie is a good man. I think He’ll help him out.”

I thought about my mom’s adage, “That’s what God does,” and how Miss Janice had very different ideas about faith. Miss Janice seemed to believe that we cause our own suffering, but that if we are good people, for the most part, God will help us out. Miss Janice seemed to think that if God “did something” bad, like get Sarah in more trouble than she deserved to be in, he did it for a good reason.

Miss Janice thinks God is good. In fact, she has said that to me many times. “God is good, baby. God is good!”

The sky had opened while we were in the Rouses, and we huddled under the awning outside in disbelief at how hard the rain was coming down.

“Just wait here and I’ll go get the car,” I offered.

“Don’t be stupid, baby,” she said.

We ran.

Back on Passera, Tosha, Robbie and Robbie’s friend were out front on the porch. “You still picking up Sarah later?” Miss Janice asked.

“Yeah, I’ll be up anyway with my nerves about tomorrow,” Robbie said. He pulled at a blunt and passed it to his friend. “You know I might doze in front of the TV, but I’m not gonna be sleeping heavy tonight.”

Miss Janice and I walked onto their porch.

“What’s up, bae?” Robbie said and smiled at me. Robbie was on the short side and fit, but his face was round and his expressions always light and inviting. Their whole family had wide smiles and really white teeth.

The friend passed me the blunt. I pulled. I was supposed to be picking Mitch up soon. He was out to dinner with some friends, a guy’s night. But how could I not take a little hit? Who knew how many more nights I would get to hang out on Robbie’s porch with him?

“I like your shirt,” I told Robbie. He wore a pink polo from Perlis, an expensive store I’d never bought anything from, and it had a red embroidered crawfish on the upper left side. Robbie always looked polished.

“Can you wash it?” the friend asked. He was much taller than Robbie, wearing a baseball cap, hoodie and jeans. His voice was low.

“Nah, dry clean only,” Robbie said.

“I hate dry clean only,” I said. “I never take it. I just wash it and ruin it, basically.”

“Me too,” the friend said and took a hit. “Me too, every time.”

I started to feel the weed kick in. Miss Janice and Tosha were talking on the other side of the porch. They usually didn’t smoke.

“You nervous for tomorrow?” I asked Robbie.

“Nah,” he said. “Just ready for it to be over. You know, I’ve been through this already. I just have to pray through it.”

“You went away already?” I asked. “I didn’t realize that.”

“Yeah, baby girl. Tosha’s been through this once with me already,” he said.

“Tosha is the best,” I said.

“I got five on a petty drug thing when I was 20. But I prayed, and as soon as I started praying, I started getting into the programs they were offering. I took parenting classes, did boot camp. And every time you finish a program, your time gets dropped six months. So I got out in two,” he explained.

The friend nodded and passed the blunt.

I was officially super high. I started to get freaked out. About what Passera would be like without Robbie. About what his life would look like in prison.

“You know people just think I’m out here doing my thing, hustling, and not giving a fuck,” Robbie went on, talking louder. “But I have a God. And I believe in him deeply.”

Miss Janice heard this and said, “That’s right, baby.”

Tosha took a sip of her pineapple vodka. The rain kept coming.

February 2016
Passera Court

Robbie left for prison on Feb. 16, 2016

On February 15, Mitch and I walked next door to Robbie and Tosha's house with Sarah and Miss Janice. There were nine of us in the first room of their dimly lit shotgun house; family and close friends. Tosha and Robbie took the couch, with RaHji wedged in between them. Mitch and I sat on the floor at their feet. There was a spread of food on the coffee table – fried shrimp, grilled salmon, cheese and crackers – but no one ate. Instead we made small talk and watched the Grammys.

Sarah bought Robbie a card for all of us to sign. It had the Superman logo on the front. I wrote something about how I would miss him; how I would take care of the boys and Tosha as best I knew how. I wrote that I would edit his book if he wanted me to. He had told me he wanted to write his memoir while in prison.

After performances by a few white, twangy artists, Tosha sighed. "Grammy music just isn't for me," she says. "It all sounds the same."

"Tosha, you gotta open your mind," Robbie rebutted. "What do you want? Big Freedia's not gonna be at the Grammys!"

And while it wasn't Big Freedia, a minute later Kendrick Lamar took the stage. He and his dancers were dressed in prison uniforms. They wore handcuffs and chains, a statement against the criminal justice system. We sat and stood around the room quietly staring at the TV, all of us scared to look at Robbie. This went on for 30 seconds until finally Robbie said, "My last night free, and this nigga gonna come out in chains?"

“HaHA!” Miss Janice cackled, and we followed suit. We laughed a little too long. And thankfully, by the time we were done, Kendrick and his crew had transformed from prisoners to neon accented tribal people. I felt nauseated.

Eventually, Robbie read our card, the flat brim of his hat tilted down. He held it with both hands in between his legs, and stared at it for a long time after reading it through. A few tears rolled down his cheeks, and he whispered, “Damn. I love y’all. I love y’all.”

He bent over to hug Mitch and me. It was a clunky hug, the two of us smashed between Robbie’s short reach, but I was glad we were in there together. Robbie got up to hug Sarah and Miss Janice too. His gray t-shirt said “Minor Setback for a Major Comeback.” He’d been wearing it a lot over the last few weeks.

When we left a few minutes later, we said goodbye like we always do: “Alright, y’all,” Miss Janice initiated. And we all slowly stood up.

We did another round of hugs. When I got to RaHji, he stood on my side with his arms around my waist. I rubbed his head and patted his back. He’d barely said a word all night.

“You can come over when I get home from work tomorrow, honey.” I told him. He nodded. We left. My nausea had lingered all night and was worse now.

Robbie was sentenced five years. Because of the overwhelming support he had gotten – tens of neighbors, teachers and friends wrote letters – the judge said he would get into various programs, like anger management class and parenting class. Like the last time, the deal was that every time he completed a program, his sentence would be dropped six months.

It was 2:00 a.m. when I woke up, my mouth watering in that terrible way. I got out of bed before it was too late, got to the bathroom. I clutched the toilet and threw up. Again and again, eyes watering, arms shaking.

I didn't know what was going on – whether I had a bug, or if my stress and sadness was causing the mess. When I got sick again at 4:00 a.m., 6:00 a.m. and 8:00 a.m., I decided it had to be both. It was Tuesday morning. I emailed my boss that I would not be able to come in.

It was noon when I wanted to move to the couch. I peeled off layers of blankets and wrapped some of them around me. The thermostat read 70 degrees but I was freezing. I collapsed on the green sofa and cried. I felt helpless and desperate. How was Tosha? How was my sweet RaHji? I was too weak to find out.

At 1:00 p.m. a knock woke me up. It scared me. We don't have a peep hole, and everyone who would normally knock – the neighbors -- knew I should be at work. I was thirsty and felt less paralyzed, like maybe I could hold down some water. I tested my legs and made it to the door.

“Who is it?” I muttered.

There was no response.

I pulled the door open just an inch. RaHji stood idly on my stoop. His eyes widened when he saw me. He charged inside.

“Miss Maggy, thank God you are home!” he cried. “I had to leave school I was so sad.”

His eyes welled up. My eyes welled up. I hugged him. His head had just recently started to reach my chest and I was not wearing a bra. I turned slightly sideways to avoid chest-head contact. “I have to sit,” I told him. He sat next to me.

“I’m so sad too,” I said. And tears began streaming down my face. I wiped them with my hoodie sleeve, then with the blanket. I pretended like I didn’t even notice that I was crying. I told RaHji that I was sick and probably shouldn’t be around him. I asked him if anyone at his house was sick; I told him that I wondered if it was something we ate. I tried to hide the quiver in my voice. The tears kept coming.

“Miss Maggy, why are you crying like that?” he asked me.

I didn’t answer.

We sat in silence, side by side on my couch.

I asked him to go to the fridge and get me the coconut water that Mitch bought for me earlier. He came back with two – one for each of us – and five packs of fruit snacks, all for him.

RaHji was wearing his navy blue Phyllis Wheatley School polo shirt, and matching cowboy boots over his khakis. Robbie bought the boots for him a few days before because RaHji had asked for them specifically.

“I respect that about the kid,” Robbie had told me. “He knows what he wants, and he asks for it.” RaHji had recently told me that if I bought him a Mac computer he would thank me every day.

Tosha walked in. “Whatchu doin home, Mag?” she asked.

“She’s sick,” RaHji said. “Mr. Mitch poisoned her.”

She shook her head.

I huffed a laugh and nudged him.

“Hji you have to let her rest; get out of here,” Tosha ordered.

He looked at me in panic. Tosha’s phone rang.

“Miss Maggy, I have to stay,” he pleaded. “Everyone keeps calling her.”

I nodded and told him I couldn't play.

He nodded back.

I looked at Tosha, who was half listening to the person on the phone, and I told her I would keep RaHji if she wasn't worried about him getting sick.

She agreed.

"How was it?" I whispered to her.

She put her hand over her phone. "Today was the hardest day," she said. "Now every day is one day closer to him getting home."

I felt the tears coming so I tried to get her out. "Go ahead and talk," I urged. "I'll send him home when I'm too tired."

She looked at RaHji and shook her head. "This little boy," she said as she left.

RaHji snuggled up to my side. I wore Mitch's hoodie and fleece pajama pants.

"I really can't play," I said.

"What about cards?" he said.

"I can try."

We played Go Fish, me reclining, him sitting straight up and doing a victory lap around the room whenever I had a card he needed. He cheated, pretending that he didn't have the cards he just asked me for. I told him cheating is bad. That winning because he cheated doesn't even count.

I asked him when he said goodbye to his dad.

"He walked me to the bus stop," Hji said, looking down at his cards. "I cried the whole way to school and everyone wanted to know why. He told me I made his life."

We sat in silence.

“What if I cry every day until he gets back, Miss Maggy?”

“So what?” I said. “You can cry as much as you want. This is a really shitty thing that’s happening to you.”

“Miss Maggy,” he scolded me.

“Sorry, but it is,” I said.

I asked if his classmates knew. He said no, that it’s none of their business, that he didn’t want their parents to know and not let his friends hang out with him. He said he talks to a counselor and that his computer teacher knew. She was the one who sent him home early.

“Miss Maggy, can we please go outside and sit in Mr. Mitch’s spot?”

Mitch’s spot is at the far end of Passera Court, where the old train tracks that service the brick yard, are. On the weekends, he’ll put one of our Tommy Bahama beach chairs out there and drink a beer in the sun.

The coconut water was staying down, making me feel a little better.

“Will you carry my chair?” I asked him.

“Yes, yes, yes,” he said and spun around. “Will you wear your cowboy boots, too?” he asked me.

I told him he would have to get them for me from the back.

He did.

I put them on and tucked in my fleece pants.

We walked along our gravelly street past his house, past the house on the corner with the young, pregnant couple in it, and to the tracks. He set down my chair and went back for his. I put up my hood and reclined. The sun felt better than I expected. I was almost warm. RaHji came back and settled next to me.

He asked me what would happen if he didn't cry every day. I asked him what he meant.

"I'm afraid to get used to it," he said.

We both welled up again.

"God, Hji, you are the smartest freaking nine-year-old I've ever met."

I told him that I could never relate to what he is going through, but that I remembered feeling scared of getting used to living without my ex-boyfriend after he dumped me.

"Why did he dump you?" RaHji asked.

"He told me he didn't love me anymore," I said.

He thought for a moment. "Miss Maggy, I woulda thrown eggs at his house."

I laughed. "Yeah," I said, "It was rough. But Mr. Mitch is way cooler than him anyway."

I explained that the good thing was his dad was coming back. Even if he did get used to it, it was all just temporary.

"A minor setback for a major dad back," I said.

RaHji gasped and giggled. He repeated this slowly, taking his time with every word. Then faster. Then so fast it became a squeal.

"I'm gonna tell him that Miss Maggy," he said.

"Good," I said.

We sat for another hour and watched the sun set, our legs stretched, cowboy boots crossed at the ankles.

Part Four
Faith, More, Safe, War

May 2016
Passera Court

On the week of my 29th birthday I told Miss Janice I wanted to celebrate with a party on Passera. We could get the grill going, have some drinks, hang out. It would be low-key, I promised her.

We sat on her porch steps in tank tops and shorts. She nodded, her head wrapped in a floral scarf, and took a drag of her Salem. It was already too hot, and I knew she didn't feel like doing much of anything – especially socializing.

“Okay,” she said, looking out at Kooch. Bob's 12-year-old Dachshund from across the street walked aimlessly around the gravelly road, slow as could be. “Who you gonna invite?”

“Just us,” I said, meaning the neighbors.

Her tiny frame shifted so she could look at me.

“Oh good!” she exclaimed with some pep. “Then we don't gotta worry how we act.”

We laughed. I knew what she meant.

By May 2016, our neighbors had become our family. RaHji was over every night that I was free, playing new music for me on YouTube while I made dinner. After work, Mitch usually went out for a bike ride or to run club, and RaHji and I had “special time.”

“Where's the computer?” he would yell as he burst through the door.

“Take off your shoes!” I'd reply.

Most of the time, Hji knew exactly where the computer was, and he'd bee line it to my night stand. RaHji had created his own user name and password for the Mac, and once logged in, he became “DJ Babyface.” At that time, he, and therefore I, became obsessed with the Kanye West's *Life of Pablo* album. And in particular, a gospel-sounding song called “Ultralight Beam.”

We'd learned all the lyrics, using kitchen utensils as our microphones, each taking turns at a verse.

"Uncle Mitch, WATCH," Hji would greet him when Mitch walked in the back, dripping in sweat. Hji started calling us Uncle Mitch and Aunt Maggy a few months earlier, without provocation.

"Okay, but wait," I'd rebut, spatula in hand. "Uncle Mitch has to take off his god damn shoes. What don't you people get?"

Without question, Mitch loved RaHji, but he didn't go out of his way to initiate spending time with him. I was the one who asked Tosha if she needed a babysitter while she worked on Saturday. I planned all of our activities. It was starting to bother me.

"Can't you go run him around?" I'd ask Mitch. He'd agree, but overall, change was slow-going. I remembered my mom, and how taking in so many kids was sometimes disruptive to the family. We understood, but it got frustrating sometimes. We had to share everything – time, space, resources. I decided not to push the issue with Mitch.

We were in the kitchen when I told Hji I wanted to have a birthday party on the street. He closed his eyes and turned his chin to the ceiling. He balled his hands in fists, raised them up above his head and swooshed them down beside his hips.

"Yessssss" he said. Then he opened his eyes. "Can I be the DJ?"

Of course he could. He knew all my favorite songs.

Hji cocked his head and peered at me for a second, perhaps surprised I'd agreed so easily.

"I'm not even gonna charge you."

On Friday, May 13, the night before my birthday, Hji, Mitch and I gathered all the lawn chairs we could find from around the street, and sat them around our front stoop in a semi-circle facing the house. Miss Janice, Tosha, Tosha's Uncle Matthew, Gay, Sarah, Hji and Abbie all trickled over for the celebration. Mitch fired up the grill and Hji started his DJing. It was Big Freedia, Beyonce, and Kanye on loop, and eventually, the ladies started yelling and dancing like we always do. Uncle Matthew and Miss Janice set a rag on fire and put it in an old tin to keep the bugs away. It was muggy, but not too hot. I wore white pants and a bright orange, flowy top.

Mitch and RaHji disappeared inside for a little while and came out with a cookie that had a candle shoved into it. The gang sang Stevie Wonder's version of "Happy Birthday," which Tosha always leads with her out-of-pitch singing and hard-core clapping. "Happy birthday to ya; Happy birthday to ya; Happy birthhhhhdayyy." Even Uncle Matthew, who hadn't parted with his 36-oz daiquiri once yet, got up and clapped. I looked around, full of love, and blew out the candle with a wish. Then Hji ran to the top of the stoop steps.

"May I have your attention," he yelled.

He spoke loud and with confidence. He looked so much older than when we met him less than two years before. We all turned to him. "Me and Aunt Maggy are going to perform a song now."

"We are?"

"Yes," he said and motioned me up next to him. "You promised!"

"I did?"

"It's called 'Ultralight Beam,'" he announced. "Uncle Mitch you can play it now."

"Aye," Mitch said and poked me as I passed him. I gave him a kiss. Mitch pulled the song up on his phone, and it blasted through the speakers.

“Here goes nothin,” I said to the crowd, and they sat and watched attentively.

“We on a ultralight beam; we on a ultralight beam;

This is a God dream; this is a God dream. This is everything.”

“Well ain’t this a nice song,” Miss Janice said, lounged back in her chair with her arms crossed. The rest watched us quietly.

This is everythinnng.

Deliver us serenity.

Deliver us peace.

Deliver us loving.

We know we need it.

You know we need it.

I looked at RaHji but he was concentrated on the crowd. Tosha laughed from behind her phone. “Look at her, Hji!” She was videoing us.

Long minutes later, we ended in a climactic chorus, along with Kanye’s choir:

I’m tryna keep my faith.

But I’m looking for more.

Somewhere I can feel safe.

And end my holy war.

And then, all the way belted out: *Faith. More. Safe. War.*

The crowd went wild. We got a standing ovation.

“Only on Passera Court!” Tosha yelled.

“That’s right baby,” Miss Janice said. “Where else?”

“I’m tellin y’all,” Tosha said. “I love my neighbors.”

Hji looked at me with raised eyebrows and a half grin, “What you think?”

“I think we killed it,” I said.

I sat down on the stoop next to Mitch. Tosha yelled for me to look at my email. One had just come in from JPay Services, an inmate email platform.⁶

“Hello,

You have received a new Message from your Inmate.

Inmate Name: Robert Dennis.

Please login to www.jpays.com to view the message.”

I opened up the JPay app on my phone. I hated JPay. Who the fuck was making money off of this anyway? I looked at Hji, who was already playing with Abbie in the street, behind the chairs. I opened the note.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!! To a very, very special lady in my family’s life!! God makes no mistakes when he sends people in your life!! And you are God sent!! Thanks for looking out for my family when I’m away. I’m forever in your debt for putting up with my creation (Hji Hji) Lol! That’s my Mini- Me. Enjoy your night tonight and do like Tosha & I! Party for the whole month of May! Kisses Mag! From: Robbie, Tosha, Ra’Saan, & Yours truly Ra’Hji! The DENNIS FAMILY. WE LOVE YOU!!!

I looked up at Tosha and put my hand over my chest.

⁶ For \$6, JPay will give you 20 “stamps.” And each email (whether sent to or from an inmate) costs one stamp, unless it has some kind of attachment, and then it might cost two. You can also send inmates money through JPay, and depending on the prison, music and videograms.

“Made my night,” I said. “That was really sweet.”

I passed the phone to Mitch, who read it quietly and put his arm around me.

“Aw, Tosha,” he said. “Wish he could be here.”

July 4-5, 2016
New Orleans

On the Fourth of July, an unbearably hot Monday, Mitch and I went to Crescent Park in the Bywater neighborhood. The horizontal stretch along the river was designed to keep the severe feeling of the old wharf there, while also having gardens and places for people to sit and swing and overlook the Mighty Mississippi. There were food trucks, a bar and a DJ who played everything from “Proud to Be an American” to the “Tootsie Roll.” The kids went wild on the dance floor as their families laid out blankets.

I was not brought up to be particularly proud of my country – recently, when I was visiting my dad and watching the USA-Colombia soccer game with him, he had whispered to me in his thick Italian accent, “I am rooting for Colombia.” It was especially hard in the summer of 2016, a year after Donald Trump started running for president, and just two months after he won the Republican primary nomination. In that last year, Trump had launched his campaign by questioning whether President Obama was born in the United States. He called Mexicans rapists, he contorted his face and flailed his arms around to mock a disabled reporter, he praised Putin, talked about bringing back “a hell of a lot worse than waterboarding,”⁷ and called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”⁸

It was an embarrassing time to be an American. The state of affairs put a vague but constant metallic taste in my mouth. Something we were regularly ingesting was not right. It was poisonous. But that night at Crescent Park, I found a brief reprieve. There were so many people

⁷ Goodman, Amy. "Trump Leads GOP Charge Embracing Torture: 'I'd Bring Back a Hell of a Lot Worse Than Waterboarding'." *Democracy Now!* Pacifica Network, 8 Feb. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

⁸ Johnson, Jenna. "Trump Calls for 'total and Complete Shutdown of Muslims Entering the United States'." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 7 Dec. 2015. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

and experiences represented in the park. An elementary-school aged boy in a wheelchair was pop-a-wheely-ing on the dance floor to the screaming delight of other children – children of various races and ethnicities. There were black and white mothers embracing hello as they opened their lawn chairs.

And the fireworks were truly marvel-worthy. The city shoots off of two barges on the river, against the backdrop of the skyline. Bellied up to the gate that separated us from the choppy brown water below, Mitch and I inhaled the scene with deep appreciation. I even mumbled the words to “A Grand Old Flag.”

On our way out, we ran into two friends, one of whom grew up in Minnesota. She smiled as we passed the dance floor.

"This is why I love New Orleans," she said. "I mean, I love Minnesota, but this wouldn't happen there. It's just, different."

Early the next morning, 80 miles Northeast of Crescent Park, in Baton Rouge, a black man named Alton Sterling was shot dead, at less than a hand's-width range, by a white police officer. It was recorded on video. They pinned him to the ground while he was reportedly selling CDs outside a convenience store, and he wriggled around. When they discovered he had a gun in his pocket, bam, bam, bam. His red T-shirt slowly soaked redder. His arm moved above his head, spastically. He died as the cops stood over him.

The next day, on Wednesday, July 6, a black man named Philando Castille was stopped for looking like the suspect of a robbery, because of his “wide nose” in St. Paul, Minnesota. His girlfriend and young daughter were in the car. The cop asked him to grab his license and registration, and as Castille went to reach for the items, he let the officer know that he had a gun

in the glove box, which he was licensed to carry. The cop shot him four times. The man's girlfriend started recording a video right then, talking into it with an eerie calmness, recounting what just happened as her boyfriend took his last garbling breaths next to her and the cop, standing at the driver's window, stumbled over his words: "Told him not to reach for it..."

On Thursday, July 7, there were protests across the country. And after spending a day avoiding social media, I finally gave in. Tosha posted a plea to friends on Facebook: Stop saying "I'm scared for my sons," she said, because that negativity invites the enemy in to "rob, kill and destroy." I liked the post.

Cliff, my 40-something, African American, lawyer friend from the corner bar, posted an article called, "Advice for White Folks in the Wake of the Police Murder of a Black Person," some of which was "don't look to your friends of color for answers today," and "What happened to Alton Sterling was in fact about race...What happened to Alton Sterling does not happen to white people." I liked that post too.

I opened up a group text that I am in with eight girlfriends who I grew up with in New Jersey. Among us, three have married, or will soon marry, boys from Woodbridge who are cops. One of my friends got married just two weeks before, and the majority of the Woodbridge police force was there.

I do not dislike my friends' cop husbands and fiancés. In fact, I both like *and* love them. I like them because they do not shy away from talking to me about issues of race and inequality, which they know I am passionate about, and unless they are really drunk, they usually listen and contribute with respect and don't shout about "working people like me and you." I love them because they love my best friends as much as I do. And it's not some macho, dog-humping love that one might expect from men who are trained to kill. It's vulnerable love.

So I opened the group text and scrolled, holding my breath. One of the girls had brought up the topic timidly. "There is a lot of hate happening on Facebook. It's making me nervous." Another friend responded equally timidly, "It's all very sad." Eventually, Mary Kate, the one who had just gotten married, said she heard, I assumed through some kind of top-secret cop grapevine, that Sterling was pretending to sell CDs, but actually pulling a gun on people who went to buy them, and robbing them. Someone else chimed in that people need to "stop doing illegal shit." The truth, we found out later, was that a homeless man had been harassing Sterling, until eventually Sterling flashed his piece – unregistered – to intimidate the man, and the man called the cops on him.

Mary Kate said she wanted to change the subject. They did. No one mentioned Minnesota. No one mentioned that "doing illegal shit" shouldn't warrant execution. No one mentioned that "What happened to Alton Sterling does not happen to white people." Including me.

I didn't mention those things because I knew that the boys were probably working at protests right then, afraid, as the girls sat home probably even more afraid. So instead of debating, I decided to send them a note of compassion. I wanted to convey that even the system's biggest critics, which they knew me to be, can acknowledge that every cop is a world, just like every other person is. I wanted the girls and their partners, my friends, to know that I understood being a cop is not easy, and that I believed in them to do the right thing.

I texted the two couples who I was closest to: "Hi. I love and support you. I know it's not an easy week. I'll be thinking about you."

The boys responded immediately, enthusiastically. Gary was in fact working at a rally in Jersey City, he said, which at that moment "was getting out of control." I wondered what that

meant. If it really was, or if he was just afraid of black people in big groups. I wished he'd have left that part out.

Mitch and I went out to dinner, and after, as we pulled up in front of the house, RaHji ran to the car.

“Aunt Maggy, I thought we was havin a barbecue,” he said sternly.

I had forgotten. We had decided it was too hot, that we'd go out to eat instead, but I never gave him the message, because, well, he was nine and didn't have a phone.

“Oh, man, Hji, I'm so sorry I didn't tell you,” I said.

Tosha poked her head out of her door. “Boy whatchu doin? Get back in here. It's late!” she yelled. Then, softly, “Hey Mag.”

I hugged him and told him we would try to barbecue Sunday.

“Are you going to your grandma's this weekend?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “I don't want to.”

“Oh and you're the boss right?” I joked. He ran inside.

RaHji's grandma lives in Baton Rouge. It didn't occur to me that he wouldn't be going there because they were scared to. It didn't occur to me to think about how he was feeling. How his perception of his place in the world as a black boy was probably changing, right then.

That night as I lay in bed thinking about everything, I did not know that in Dallas, a protest had in fact gotten wildly “out of control.” A sniper was shooting at cops from the top of a building. The next morning, at 8:30 a.m. I sat down at my desk at work and saw the headline: “5 Officers Killed, 7 Injured in Dallas Ambush.” It described the event, which went on all night, as a “war.”

July 8, 2016
City Park, New Orleans

After a long, somber week, consumed with reading about and analyzing violence, I got home on Friday and walked out front, hoping to recruit RaHji for a walk around City Park with me. I wanted to talk to him about how he was feeling, to give him the opportunity to share. Sarah and Miss Janice were on their porch, and RaHji and Abbie on Abbie's porch. At practically the same time, the neighbors yelled, "Maggy!" "Hey, sweetheart," "Hey, Miss Maggy," "Hey, Aunt Maggy."

"Damn, y'all." I said with a smile. "I needed that warm welcome today."

"Yeah, baby the world's gone upside down," Miss Janice said.

"What are the kids doin'?" I asked, nodding to Hji and Abbie.

"Abbie's dad fixin to take them out," Miss Janice said.

"Sector Six," RaHji yelled from the next house. Sector Six marketed itself as the "world's largest trampoline park."

I walked over to him. "No way."

"Yes," he said with a smile as wide as his whole face, and Abbie nodded silently but profusely behind him. "And I done been there already, like 50 times."

"I've always wanted to go," I told him.

"We'll go, Aunt Maggy," he reassured me. "Don't worry."

"Alright cool," I said. "Can I get a hug from you guys? It's been a long day."

They met me in the street and wrapped their arms around me from either side.

"Ah, thank you." I said.

"You had a bad day, Aunt Maggy?" Hji asked.

“Well yeah, have you been hearing the news lately?”

“Yeah,” Hji said. “A lotta people dyin.”

“Who’s dying?” I asked.

“Police,” he said. Abbie was silent.

“Who else?”

“Uh,” he looked down. “I forget their names.”

“How did they die?”

“Police,” he said.

I nodded. “Well this weekend when I see you, we should talk about it more, okay?”

He nodded and made eye contact, something we’d been working on.

I walked back over to Miss Janice and Sarah. “Y’all feel like going for a walk?” I asked.

Sarah had plans. Miss Janice called me crazy with the heat. I looked at her and begged, “Please Miss J?”

She sighed and yelled, “Ah, shit, baby, fine, where we goin?!”

We started for the park, the chimes tree, my happy place. The chimes tree is a live oak decorated with seven chimes of all different sizes, the biggest being twelve feet long. Despite their range in pitch, they are all tuned to the pentatonic scale, which is often called the “jazz scale.” When the wind blows, which it was that day, the chimes sing in harmony, and never the same exact song. I’d taken Miss Janice to the tree before and she loved it. I thought it would be a good place for us to find some peace.

We chased the shade down N. Murat Street toward Orleans Avenue. We walked on autopilot, fast, not paying attention to the beauty around us, but talking and talking. Miss Janice

was furious, and I hadn't expected it. Her usual give-it-up-to-God attitude had transformed into anger and despair.

“How you gonna kill someone for having an illegal gun?” She talked about Sterling. “That’s why we have fuckin jails and laws. He didn’t need to die. And the Minnesota thing. That man was a fine man with a nice job and everything, and for NOTHIN. In my day, when they pulled you over, they made you get out the car and put your hands on it. That way, if there was something in the car they could find it and no shit like this would happen. In my day the police used to respect the piss outta us and we respected the piss outta them. It was better then, baby. It was better. They wasn’t going around killing little black boys just cause they black.”

I agreed, of course, and said so. But I also felt heavy, guilty, and I wanted to tell her about my connection to the other side. I told Miss Janice about my cop friends. She was quiet. I told her that I had grown up with them, that I wanted them to meet RaHji, so he would understand that not all cops are bad.

“Yeah and they could learn from him too!” she yelled. “That we ain’t all like what they think. Cause we ain’t!!”

We walked passed the great lawn of City Park, where a black family was dressed in matching orange T shirts, having a reunion. We passed the sculpture garden and Morning Call, a café au lait and beignet place. We walked towards the New Orleans Museum of Art. I asked Miss Janice what she thought made these police mess up so gravely. I told her that, because I had so many cop friends, it was hard for me to believe that a lot of these guys wanted to kill black men out of hate.

“Do you think they just panic and go stupid? Do you think they are afraid?”

“They ain’t afraid. I think it’s the first one. They go fuckin stupid. I don’t know what it is,” she yelled, arms pumping. “If they afraid they shouldn’t of taken that fuckin job. Everybody has a choice, and if you afraid and can’t do, your, job, then be somethin else! You know? That’s their job. Just like you got your job. If you kill a man for having a legal gun and telling you that,” she spoke of Castille, “you fuckin up your job!”

We passed a young white couple at their SUV, putting their baby boy in a car seat and their toddler in next to him.

“What if some black man just came up to that car and got them two little boys?” Miss Janice yelled. And her voice cracked. And I’ve never heard Miss Janice’s voice crack.

I stepped in front of her and turned to face her. I grabbed her by her bony shoulders and pulled her into me. At first she resisted. “Okay, baby, alright,” she said, tense. Then she laughed and patted my back. “Alright, okay, okay. HaHA. You somethin else little girl.”

At the chimes tree, Miss Janice told me about her three black sons, now men – Dooney, Travis and Antoine. She told me about her gift of motherhood, her own open door, and we talked about RaHji, too.

“How do you think he feels about this stuff goin on?” I asked her.

“Well, Hji is very smart,” she said, in between puffs of her Salem as we sat on a bench under the singing oak. The chimes lulled us. We were relaxed now. “He’s very smart. Me and him talks. He asks me all kinds of questions. I’ll have some answers for him about this.”

“What are you gonna say?” I prodded. “I wanna know what you’ll say so I can say the same.”

“I think I’ll tell him that by the time he get to be that age, it’s probably gonna change for him. They ain’t gonna mess with him right now because he’s too small. By the time he make like 18, 19 years old, maybe the world will be a different way.”

“Do you believe that?” I asked.

“Not really.” she replied. “But that’s what I’m gonna tell him.”

On our walk back home, Miss Janice and I weren’t on autopilot anymore. We enjoyed the view, and she greeted everyone we saw with a, “Hey baby!”

We got to the oak grove on City Park Avenue just as the sun was setting. It reminded me of my first hour living in New Orleans, when Mitch and I parked the Budget Truck and rushed to the park, desperate for validation. With Miss Janice that day, the oaks, dripping with moss, were backlit by the dusk again. They were strong, old and wise. We walked quietly with our chins turned up to their canopies.

“Well, I’ll be,” Miss Janice said. “I never seen this park look so pretty.”

“I know, huh?” I said.

“HaHA. It’s like these trees did it just for us,” she laughed. “Like they knew we needed it.”

Miss Janice

Some, they're not a leader, they're a follower. That's the way Travis was. I knew how Travis was when he was coming up. He was easy to just say, if someone came and talked to him, he was easy to say, "Okay bro, okay I'm with you bro." That type. He was the only one that type. Dooney, Dooney different. He's just quiet. He stays away from that shit. Dooney's very quiet. And the oldest one, Toine, oh I knew I wasn't gonna have no problem out of his raggly little ass. He was a church-going boy from the beginning, I'm telling you. ... He just was born like that. Just had it in him. And he stuck with it. The rest of em, when I left church after the storm, they left. But him – never stopped.

Yeah I never had a problem with that boy. I told you, the only problem I had, he was at school. He was in the tenth or eleventh grade, one of em, and the teacher came calling me at night at the house and said, "I have to speak to you about Antoine." You know his name is Antoine but we called him Toine.

I said, "Okay, what time should I come?"

She said, "You can come in the morning, about 9:00."

"Okay I'll be there." I knew nothing was wrong because the boy never gave me no problem. Whatever was wrong, somebody musta been messing with him or something like that. So I never said anything to him that night. I didn't tell him I was coming. So I sent him to school and then I came, and the teacher came in.

I said, "What's the problem?"

And she said, "Antoine, he's disturbing the class."

I said, "Toine?" I said, "Disturbing the class? What's going on?"

"Oh he's just preaching and singing."

HaHA. So look what I told the lady. I said, "Miss, I don't mean no harm, but if he is in here preaching to y'all and singing, you should take about 20 minutes of your class time and all y'all should sit there and listen."

Girl when I told that lady that she just looked at me and laughed. I said, "Baby because he's church-goin, and one day he will be a pastor, preacher, whatever."

My baby came to me when he was, I think he was in his 20s. He woke me up. I was sleeping.

He said, "Ma!"

I said "What! What!" You know, thinking something was wrong. You know somebody wake you up outta your sleep. I said, "What! What!"

He said, "I got the calling."

"You got the calling? Boy what is you talking about?" I was asleep. Then I said, "Ohhh." That's what I said, "Ohhhh! Oh good son. We're gonna talk about this in the morning when I wake up, okay?"

The calling is when Jesus comes to you. That's how you get the calling. I don't know how, the Man just came to him. He got the calling. And after the storm, that's when he became a pastor. I mean he was preaching and carrying on in all them little churches and stuff, but after the storm he got his own little church in Texas. He didn't come back. I knew he was going to get it sooner or later, I just didn't know when.

See, everybody have a gift. Some people have one, they don't know what it is. Mines, yeah I know what it is. I must be on this earth to take care of every God damn body else's kids. I been doin it all my damn life. Since I was twelve year's old with all my little cousins and them, under me and over me too. I took carea everybody. I'd take the kids from the neighborhood,

bring em in my house, dress em up, clean em up. You know every neighborhood you always have somebody who's not really gifted with what you got. And they didn't used to have a lot. Poor kids used to run around, snotty nose, no shoes on. I used to take em in. My poor mama. She used to say, "Janice if you take another God damn child in this house." She got tired of looking at them children. Then I started having children, you know? My mama got tired of looking at them.

July 2016
Passera Court

Two weeks after Miss Janice and I walked in the park, Mom and Michael visited New Orleans. They arrived on the last day of the 2016 Democratic National Convention, and rather than tour the town, we stayed in and waited for Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton to take the stage. We heaped our plates with Mitch's famous red beans and rice, and took positions on the green couch and the papasan chair. We yelled about Donald Trump and listened intently to the series of speakers taking the stage. Eventually, Tosha texted and asked if she could come by to dry some clothes. A few minutes later she walked in with her hair in rollers and a yellow laundry sack on her hip.

"Oh, hi!" she said when she saw my mom. Tosha rushed to the couch, where Mom had her feet propped up. They hugged.

"Hi Tosha," Mom said. "I feel like I know you!"

"Me too," Tosha said. "Thank you so much."

Mom nodded. "Oh it's no problem," she said.

And that was that.

That night was the first time Mom and Tosha met, though they both knew a lot about each other. Mom had met RaHji on previous visits, and I kept her up to date on how the Dennis family, and Passera Court, was doing. When Tosha was in a crisis about how expensive sending Ra'Saan, their oldest, to football camp would be that summer, I mentioned it to Mom and she sent me \$200 to contribute. That took care of one-third of the cost.

Tosha threw the clothes into the dryer and we invited her to sit and watch the convention with us. RaHji came over in his Batman pajamas, and sat in between my Mom and me on the couch.

Finally, Hillary Clinton took the stage. Immediately Mom and I began crying. We continued, on and off, during her speech, while also giggling at ourselves, at each other, at our sameness in our capacity for feeling. RaHji sat between us with wide eyes and zipped lips. He attempted to get Mitch's attention with the intensity of his stare, so that Mitch might acknowledge his position and give him permission to laugh at us. When Hillary quoted her "Women's rights are human rights, and human rights are women's rights," and we lost it, Mitch finally looked at Hji, and the whole room cracked up.

That night though, I felt I had good reason to cry. I cried because I had the privilege of watching Hillary Clinton's historic speech with two of the best moms I knew. I cried because I felt grateful that Mitch was a feminist, and that RaHji had only known one president – Barack Obama – and now was getting to see a woman run for office. Up to this point, it felt that Hillary's campaign had not been focusing enough on her role as the first woman running for office, but rather playing it down and repeating her experience and qualifications. This night, though, the campaign was celebrating Clinton's historic status with great enthusiasm. And I was in good company for the occasion.

Part Five

Darkness and Light

August 2016
Passera Court

Eventually, RaHji and I had the police brutality conversation. The setting was the same as always – us in my kitchen, me cooking dinner and Hji on the computer. I broached the topic gently.

“So we never talked about everything that happened a couple weeks ago,” I said.

I still wasn’t sure exactly what I wanted to say to him, but I felt like he needed the opportunity to express himself. One of the reasons I assumed Hji liked coming over so much, was that I cared and asked about his opinions. And he had a lot of them.

But this time Hji didn’t respond. He started playing a song from an upbeat band called Jacubi, which we had discovered together at a festival at Tulane University.

“You don’t want to talk about it?” I asked.

He looked at the computer and mouthed the lyrics. Then, after a few seconds he said, “I don’t know, Aunt Maggy.”

I told him I just wanted to make sure he was okay. That I realize this must be affecting him, and his idea of his place in the world. I asked him how he felt about cops.

“I always look at them and say hello when I see them,” he said.

“You do?” I asked. “How come?”

“My mom does that, and you know, she’s like a role model to me.”

I laughed. “She’s like a role model to me, too,” I said.

And then, stumbling for words, I told him about my cop friends in Woodbridge. I told him that not all cops are racist – that some definitely are – but not all of them.

Hji’s face, still looking at the computer screen, contorted. His eyebrows furrowed together and his nostrils flared out.

“That’s kinda weird, Aunt Maggy,” he said.

“That I have friends who are cops?” I asked. “Why is it weird?”

“Because my dad,” he said, staring straight ahead.

I took a hard swallow.

“You think the cops took your dad, or did the system take your dad?” I asked him.

What was I even talking about? Why was I forcing him to have this conversation with me? I took a deep breath.

“I guess that makes sense,” I stumbled. “Hji, listen, I guess I just want you to know that you can be anything you want to be. You are so smart and talented and I don’t want this to get in your way. I don’t want you to have hate in your heart, or for you to be afraid.”

Hji continued to stare at the computer. He typed in the YouTube search bar.

Desperate, I turned to the wisdom of Miss Janice.

“Plus, I think by the time you’re older, it’s not going to be like this anymore.”

With that, Hji finally looked at me, interested. Thank God for that woman, I thought.

“Why you think that?” Hji asked.

“I just do,” I lied. “I just think we’re at a tipping point, and that things are going to get better...because they have to, you know?”

Hji smiled with his mouth closed and nodded.

“Yeah, I think that’s probably true,” he said.

October 2016
Passera Court

On October 13, 2016, RaHji turned ten years old. It was the first time Robbie missed his son's birthday, and if he didn't get out early, there would be four more birthdays missed after this. None of the adults talked about it in the days leading up to that Thursday, but a quiet somberness had fallen on Passera Court.

It felt like our funk on Passera was part of a collective national funk. RaHji's birthday was just a week after a video of Donald Trump bragging about sexually assaulting women, about, as it was leaked, "grabbing them by the pussy." It was two weeks before *The Crusader* newspaper, which is affiliated with the Klu Klux Klan, endorsed Trump. Racial tensions were high, and even Mitch was on edge about it. A white contractor whom he worked with told him in October that his haircut was starting to make him "look like a terrorist."

"What did you say?" I asked Mitch.

"Nothing," he said. "I kept working."

The fall, with its cool evenings and shortening days, meant that the holidays were around the corner and Robbie would be gone for those too. Tosha was working as a paralegal by day and server by night, to pay for RaHji's laser tag birthday party, to get ready for Christmas. In the meantime, Hji had been acting out. He frequently got detention for being disruptive in class. Some days he seemed withdrawn, and others, like he was reverting to a younger age. When we went grocery shopping he would ask for everything, and when I said no, he would pout and moan and drag his feet. If he and Abbie were playing together and I invited them in, he would whisper in my ear not to let her come. He rarely looked at me in the eye when he spoke anymore.

Miss Janice had been watching Hji during the week of his birthday – he was on fall break – so Tosha could work, but Hji was wearing her out, too. She had to look after a few of her grandkids at the same time, and you could tell she was frustrated even in simple conversation.

“What’s up Miss J?” Mitch asked as we walked outside to prep for Hji’s birthday barbecue. Mitch turned on the grill and I set up the table and chairs.

“I’m fine and how about yourself?” she asked.

I walked over to her porch. “You okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine,” she yelled. “Had him all day.” Miss Janice pointed to Hji’s house. “Took em to the park and shit. Little boy don’t listen to a word I say.”

I scrunched my mouth together in solidarity.

“It’ll be over soon,” I said.

“Yeah and I can’t wait. Tomorrow’s his last day off.”

“Have you talked to her?” I pointed to Sarah’s door, on the other side of Miss Janice’s double.

Sarah had been dealing with a lot, too. The week before, she slept over at our house for five nights to escape her boyfriend’s violent alcohol bender. Mitch and I had barely seen her because we worked opposite schedules, but she was suffering, and we’d taken to sleeping with mace on our bed stands, just in case.

“A little bit,” Miss Janice said. “She gettin a little braver. You know, just in the way she’s talkin. She’ll say stuff like ‘Fuck him’ now. I’m hopin she fixin to leave.”

I sighed and shook my head.

“If something happened to that baby while I was on the other side of the wall, I don’t know what I’d do,” Miss Janice said.

I didn't know what any of us would do, and that's why I gave Sarah my key and told her to come any night, and to stay if she wanted to.

But all of this was taking a toll on Mitch and me, too. We were spending so much time with our neighbors that we hadn't done much on our own. Date nights felt like a distant memory. It was exhausting. A few nights after Hji's party, I called my mom for advice.

"Listen Mag," she said. "It took me a while to learn this, but eventually I realized that all those people we helped could survive without me. And I also realized that the more you give, the more people will take."

"But they aren't taking..." I started to defend them.

Mom cut me off. "I can give you the example of neighborhood kids," she said. "I didn't have boundaries. I didn't say 'Guys you can eat over but only once a week.' Instead I was feeding everyone all the time, and it was expensive. And sometimes I feel like I'm still paying for it.

"Now, I just dedicate one or two days when I'm completely devoted to others, outside of my job... It's almost like a day of devotion. Because we're not Mother Teresa. Like you have to understand that what you are doing is almost like church. You can do church all day one day a week, but you can't do it every day. You will enjoy them more if you make time for yourself, too."

I resolved that to sustain my loving relationship with my neighbors, and with my boyfriend, I had to heed Mom's advice. Mitch was training for the New York City marathon in October, and sometimes after work, while he ran, I ignored knocks, or opened the door and told RaHji, Miss Janice or Tosha that I was busy. I cooked by myself, started my own workout

regimen. And what felt like miraculously, the neighbors seemed to understand. The knocks and calls became less frequent. The time we did spend together, more quality.

November 2016
Freehold, New Jersey

The New York City Marathon was on November 6, 2016. It would be Mitch's sixth official marathon, but I was determined to make it his best one yet. I had arranged for my family to host his parents. They would sleep at my dad's house, so the construction and dogs at my mom's wouldn't be an issue, and all of us would have dinner together on the Saturday before the race. Then we would go into New York to cheer him on, Sunday morning.

Since Mitch and I moved to New Orleans, my parents became accustomed to eating together, often at one of their homes. We had always done birthdays and graduations as a family, but those happened in party settings. After moving, it became evident that my trips back to New Jersey were so fast and infrequent, that the only way to have quality and quantity time with Mitch and me, would be to have it together. Sitting at a table with Mom, my dad, my stepdad Michael, and my stepmom, Arlene, had become a beautiful development in my world. They were not just civil, but friends – bound together by history, and love for me and my sisters, Val and Nina. Luckily, as we were just three days out from the presidential election, they were connected in political philosophy too. I knew Mitch's parents, Matthew and Roxanne Mendis, were well aligned.

My mom, Michael, Mitch and his parents arrived at my dad and Arlene's immaculate home promptly at 4 p.m., per Arlene's request. Getting out of the car, Mom and I joked that it was the first time we'd been punctual for anything. Arlene, who is Puerto Rican, had called me about "the menu" for the occasion at least six times in the last several weeks, until she finally decided to cook Puerto Rican food. She opened the door in her apron. Mom and Michael greeted my dad and Arlene with hugs and compliments – about the landscaping, the fall-themed décor, the smell of the food. Each of my parents had met Matthew and Roxanne before, but they had

never all been together. I could tell they were doing their best to show the Mendis family we were a united front.

Perched on stools and sitting around the island countertop in the kitchen, we snacked on gorgeously displayed hors d'oeuvres – cheeses, crudités, and homemade empanadas. Roxanne and Matthew were humbled by the presentation.

“You really didn’t have to do this,” Matthew said again and again. “We’re simple people.”

It was funny to see them all acting so polite. At this point, Mitch and I had been together for almost five years, and with the exception of Roxanne, who was quiet like Mitch, our parents had remarkably strong personalities. Now, at my dad’s house, they were pretending to be mild-mannered. Mitch and the race was our natural ice-breaker. Was he nervous? What was his goal time? What did he want to eat for breakfast? Mitch said he was nervous, but mostly because we were all coming to see him. He was used to running small races, and to me being his lone spectator. The next day, with all the friends and family members meeting us in the city, we would have a cheering squad of at least 15.

Eventually, we moved from the kitchen to the dining room for dinner. I was already full, but we had several more courses to go. Arlene had made salad, fish, rice and beans, and roasted pork for dinner. And there was, of course, wine. The wine flowed mightily, steering our conversation to politics in no time. It started with Donald Trump, his bigotry, his wealth, and his habitual lying to the media and American people. We talked about the climate – about Trump’s ties to Russia and the fossil fuel industry – and how if he were to be elected, it would expedite global warming to an irreparable place. With the help of the wine, our parents started acting like themselves. Matthew talked about working at the World Bank early in his career, and being the

first person there to lead an investment project in clean energy. Michael, who owns his own vertical blinds company, talked about being an honest businessman. Leaning on her historical background, Mom compared the rise of Trump with the rise of Hitler – she was the only one of us who was certain he would be elected. My dad spoke about the CIA’s assassination of Salvador Allende, the former president of Chile, after he nationalized the country’s copper.

“Every time I fly and the plane is ready to land, I look out at the thousands of lights, and I tink about how much copper we are using in America, and I tink about Allende,” he said with his thick accent. “Close your eyes and really tink about that,” he told us.

“Yeah, Stefano, we’re going to close our eyes,” Arlene said.

We all burst into laughter.

Mitch, who was sitting at the head of the table, was quiet for most of the dinner, likely because he had not had any wine, to preserve himself for the race. His mom had been quiet too, but nodding wide-eyed at everyone’s points. As I helped Arlene clean up in the kitchen, I thanked her for making the evening so special.

“You’re welcome, sweetie,” she said. “When I was cooking I was thinking, we’re gonna get you a proposal out of this!”

I cringed and forced a laugh. Up until that year, I hadn’t felt rushed to get married. I had resented the outside expectation, the constant questioning of parents, friends, coworkers, cab drivers, and our neighbors. “When are you going to get engaged?” everyone asked. I was still scared of losing my independence, I was scared of divorce, of our 40s, that decade when all couples seem fairly miserable. But in the darkest and happiest moments of 2016, I found myself yearning to seal the deal, to hear Mitch take a vow that he would be my loving partner for all the

darkness and light ahead. I couldn't imagine spending my life without him, and sometimes I worried that he was still making up his mind about me.

Arlene unveiled a huge spread of homemade desserts and Dad brought out the grappa. Our conversation turned to race. Matthew was against identity politics. He believed that the Census and identification of race on standardized tests and government documents should be abolished. My parents agreed, but I held firm against their arguments. Matthew was of course arguing in his own best interest, and in the interest of Mitch and his daughters. It was easy for a wealthy brown man to say we should forget about race, at a time when a racist demagogue was running for president.

“But what about all the people who are descendants of slaves?” I asked. “Who couldn't vote in the South until the 60s? We owe them something. Forgetting about race means forgetting about slavery.”

We talked about the possibility of having just two bubbles then, which would say, “descendant of slave,” or “Native American.” My dad passed me the Tembleque, a Puerto Rican, coconut gelatin dessert – it was an opaque, milky color.

I pushed it around on my plate with my fork.

“Sorry, Maggy,” he said and laughed. “It's very white. You don't have to eat it.”

I flushed and rolled my eyes. Everybody cracked up.

The next day was one of the happiest 2016 had to offer. Mitch ran 26.2 miles, through New York's five boroughs in 3:34 – within the time range he had hoped for. More than 15 of us waited for him to pass on First Avenue and 65th Street in Manhattan, with a spray-painted sheet that said, “Let's Go Mitchums!” so he wouldn't miss us. We met him again near the finish line,

at Mile 25 in Central Park. He smiled through his pain as we screamed for him. After the race, we celebrated with a big dinner at my mom's house, which one of her former students, who was starting a catering business, prepared. Then we drove back to Maryland with Mitch's family. I was exhausted but full of joy and love for the experience that we all got to share.

November 8-12, 2016
Washington, D.C. to New Orleans

Two days later, on November 8, 2016, Mitch and I went to Washington, D.C. for Election Day. We had voted early at New Orleans' City Hall. We stayed at the Hilton on 16th Street, just two blocks from the White House. Our plan was to watch the election coverage at a friend's apartment, and once Clinton's victory was announced, to bring a bottle of champagne to the front of the White House for a toast to the first Madame President. Our plan did not pan out.

Opposite to the 2008 election, when I watched the coverage in a room of only vaguely interested people, this year Mitch and I were surrounded by passionate best friends. Friends who understood what was at stake. These friends appreciated the magnitude of this country electing the first woman president, and how important it was that Hillary become president instead of a man who bragged about grabbing women by the pussy, a man who campaigned on racism and misogyny.

Also in contrast to the 2008 election, we watched in horror as the states turned red. Mitch and I returned to our hotel stunned. We turned off the TV before Trump's victory was officially announced. We held each other. I felt a deep and sharp pain vibrating through my body. I felt grief. I felt hate and rage. I thought of my friends in Woodbridge, whose cop husbands had undoubtedly voted for Trump, and I knew that it would take a lot of time and discussion to not feel hurt by them anymore. Mitch thought of his conservative family members – the descendants of the Confederates – and he suffered too. Everything would be different now.

I woke up at 5 a.m. My pillow was wet and my eyes swollen. How could they do this to us? To women, to immigrants, to every single person of color? Don't they know what they did? Mitch hugged me. He didn't say it would be okay.

That day, social media erupted with stories of “Day 1 of Trump’s America.” A picture of graffiti in Durham, North Carolina that said: “Black Lives Don’t Matter and Neither Does Your Votes.” A principal in Pennsylvania admitted that white students were chanting “Cotton Picker,” “You’re a N-,” and “Heil Hitler.” A woman in Delaware reported on Facebook that while pumping gas, a group of white men approached her and said, “How scared are you, you black bitch? I should just kill you right now. You’re a waste of air.” One man showed her his gun and said she was lucky people were watching.⁹

All day, and then all week, it was rage, despair, a brief distraction, and then greater despair. By the end of that week, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported 200 hate crimes (there were far more reported on Twitter, Instagram, SnapChat and Facebook). Vandalism, threats, and violence seemed to scorch our American soil. Every time I read about an incident I thought of RaHji. How I told him it would be different when he was older. How he believed me.

“I’m just going to keep lying to him,” I told Mitch on our plane ride home. “I’m just going to keep telling him it’s going to be better soon.”

RaHji came over on Saturday. We watched him from 9:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., while Tosha worked at the restaurant. We took him for a hike across the river at Jean Lafitte National Historic Park and Preserve. On the car ride, as Mitch and I considered who of our friends and family members voted for Trump, and whether we’d have to see them over Thanksgiving, Hji just listened. Despite having planned to put on a happy face for him, I was devastated and it was

⁹ “A collection of Tweets about racist episodes POC are facing now that Trump is our president-elect,” *Moments*, Twitter. 9, Nov. 2016. Web. 6, Jan. 2017.

obvious. As we parked at the trail head, he said, “Let’s take a break from it, Aunt Maggy. Cause you really can’t do nothin about it right now.”

Mitch laughed. “He’s right,” he said.

We walked on a wooden platform built above the swamp water, which weaved through cypress and oak trees. We read plaques about different species of plants, and saw a few lizards and spiders. RaHji was out of his comfort zone, and ready to get back to the city sooner than we were. He toughed it out, though, after we promised him he could stay for dinner.

On the car ride home, as we crossed the Crescent City Connection bridge, overlooking New Orleans’s downtown, Hji told us he was learning about the Civil Rights Movement in school. He told us about Ruby Bridges, who was one of the first black children to integrate an all-white school in the Deep South. She did so in New Orleans, at William Frantz Elementary School in the city’s Lower Ninth Ward. Bridges was the little girl who Norman Rockwell painted in his famous piece, *The Problem We All Live With*.

“I wrote an essay about her and the Little Rock Nine,” Hji told us. “And one of my classmate’s aunts is friends with her, so we might even get to meet her.”

Mitch, Hji and I cooked dinner together, and Tosha and Sarah joined us to eat. We sat at the dining room table lamenting about politics, and again Hji sat quietly and listened.

“I know there’s racism everywhere, but most of the time I forget – I just don’t feel it – ‘cause I’m so used to y’all,” Tosha said at one point. I looked at Hji and he nodded at me.

Having one more glass of wine together on the green couch after the company left, Mitch put his arm around me said, “See, we don’t have to lie to him. We just have to keep treating him the same. We just have to keep doing our thing.”

RaHji

Write an essay using the picture, “The Problem We All Live With,” the article, “What it Felt Like to be First” and *Freedom’s Children* pages 36-49 to explain what role children played in integrating schools.

During the Civil Rights movement children played an important role. The role that children played was to be brave. Those children were Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine. They showed bravery by walking through people who were yelling at them and throwing things at them.

The Little Rock Nine integrated Little Rock Central High School. It was hostile. People were yelling at them because they were the only blacks to go there. Now Ruby Bridges she was the only black child to go to her school too. Ruby had to be escorted by a US Marshal because people was mad that she was the only black kid to go to her school when she was five years old.

So I have been talking about the children who played a big role during the Civil Rights movement. But I really should have been talking about how these black children inspired others. The little kids that were watching wanted to do what Ruby Bridges and the Little Rock Nine was doing. They still inspire me to be brave today.

December 2016
New Orleans

The aftermath of the election was difficult. For weeks I cried, sometimes in bar bathrooms, about Donald Trump and the country's state of affairs. Each week brought something new to mourn. On November 13, Trump announced that he picked Steve Bannon to be the White House Chief Strategist. Bannon is the former head of the right-wing news outlet *Brietbart Media*, which, under his leadership, became a "white, ethno-nationalist propaganda mill," full of sexist, racist and anti-Semitic articles.¹⁰

On November 21, a video leaked from a self-proclaimed "alt-right" conference in Washington, D.C., which showed hundreds gathering to celebrate Donald Trump's victory and raising their arms in the traditional Nazi salute. The speaker in the video, Richard Spencer, yelled "Heil Trump! Heil our people! Heil victory! ... America was, until this past generation, a white country, designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us."

"Heil victory!" the crowd yelled.¹¹

On December 5, the NYPD reported a 115 percent increase in hate crimes in New York City. On December 11, it was reported that Trump would name the CEO of Exxon, billionaire Rex Tillerson, as Secretary of State. America's status as a global oppressive empire, hell-bent on preserving its "whiteness," continues to be on full blast.

¹⁰ Goodman, Amy. "A White Nationalist & Anti-Semite in the Oval Office: Trump Taps Breitbart's Bannon as Top Aide." *Democracy Now!* Pacifica Network, 14 Nov. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

¹¹Gonzalez, Juan. "'Heil Victory!' Alt-Right Groups Emboldened by Trump's Election & Chief Strategist Steve Bannon." *Democracy Now!* Pacifica Network, 22 Nov. 2016. Web. 06 Jan. 2017.

The chaos, however, put some fire under Mitch and me, and has even strengthened our bond. We started donating to ACLU, we call our senators weekly, and we even knocked on doors to support Democrat Foster Campbell in Louisiana's U.S. Senate runoff election. He lost on December 10. Miss Janice, Mitch and I went to vote together, and we brought RaHji. When Miss Janice noticed there weren't treats at the polls, like there had been during the presidential election, she said, "No coffee? No candy? Let me go give my vote back."

Miss Janice and I started a podcast too. We're calling it "From the Front Porch," and it is just that – us, sitting on her front porch, talking about our week. My hope is that it will project a positive example of what it means to live in a diverse community – how beautiful that experience has the potential to be. Miss Janice's hope is that it will make us rich and famous. We record on Saturdays, one of the two days each week I spend with the neighbors now. Most of the time, RaHji joins in and takes over. He seems to be doing much better than he was around his birthday – he is engaged, interested in what he's learning in school. He seems, for the most part, happy.

The rest of our Saturday is usually spent far from the front porch – in City Park, trying new restaurants, at the zoo, movies, or even in the French Quarter. RaHji, Mitch and I have had a lot of adventures lately. And because I know we won't see RaHji as much as we used to during the week, I am more present during our hang-outs, and Mitch comes more often. RaHji definitely notices the latter, and he and Mitch seem to have a growing connection, which I could not be happier about.

Christmas and New Year's fell on a Sunday (visiting day) this year, which meant that RaHji, Tosha and Ra'Saan got to see Robbie for both. As of now, Robbie is still on the waitlist for the sentence-reducing programs he has been accepted into, which means that as of now, he still has four years and one month left in prison. He recently sent Mitch and me a letter. In it was

a picture of the family from their holiday visit. They are standing in front of an orange backdrop, posing like people do against fake beach scenes on cruises. I sat, stunned and disgusted by the corporatization of the prison system, but also warmed by Robbie's sentiment, his thoughtfulness. Both mine and Mitch's family sent money and gifts to Tosha and the boys for Christmas, and Robbie thanked us obsessively in his note.

On December 21, the night before we were flying to the Northeast to visit our families, Mitch and I planned a date night at Bayonna, a fancy restaurant in the French Quarter. It was our Christmas present to one another. On our way there, Mitch suggested we stop at the chimes tree because we were running early. It was a nice night so I obliged, and as we parked and started to walk across City Park to the tree, I noticed that it seemed to be glowing from the center of its branches. It was beautifully lit up.

“Oh, my God!” I exclaimed. “What do you think that is?”

Mitch was quiet. I grabbed his hand and it was shaking. I knew then, what was about to happen, and I gave him a big hug. He laughed and held my hand again. We walked to the glowing tree, and the chimes sang above us. He turned to me.

“Maggy,” he started with a trembling voice. “It's the winter solstice – the darkest day of the year, in one of the darkest years that I can remember. And you are my sunshine.”

Then Mitch dropped to one knee and presented a beautiful sapphire ring, the Sri Lankan jewel.

“And I want you to be my sunshine forever,” he said.

I squealed and kissed him with all my might. It was the happiest night of my life.

In 2017, and all of our years to come together, our hearts and doors will be open. And yes, RaHji will be in the wedding.

Vita

Maggy Baccinelli grew up in Woodbridge, New Jersey and is a 2009 graduate of the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism. Captivated by New Orleans' people and stories, Maggy moved to the Crescent City in search of an adventure, and she found one through the process of writing her first book, *New Orleans Neighborhoods: A Cultural Guide* (The History Press, Oct. 2015), and her thesis, *Open Doors*, for the University of New Orleans' MFA program. Maggy celebrates and is humbled by her neighbors and friends in New Orleans every day.