

Onyx Identity

A cylindrical cap of soot grey ash formed at the end of her cigarette. With every dilapidated inhalation of her sweat beaded chest the ashes grew denser. In an attempt to reach from her seated position on the carpet to the clay ashtray on the coffee table, the mentholated tobacco stick fell from the girl's fingers. Rushing to save her stress-relieving friend, she leaned forward with a guttural moan.

An uneasy mixture of singeing carpet, and now singeing human flesh congregated in the hot, smoke-laden air. She winced under the weight of the excruciating pain. Her savior's dark, age-wrought hands, held a white rag, heavy with cool water. In soft, sensual wipes, paired with soft, sensitive words, she eased away her daughter's peering tears.

"Baby, you know you've got to stay still, mama's hands ain't what they used to be. You're gonna have your whole forehead burnt up if you do that again."

"I know, mama, I'm sorry," the girl said reaching up to rub her wounded brow.

She dotted out her cigarette, and reached for a glass of ice-water that hadn't been iced for over an hour now. Every window in the doublewide was open, but the yellowed lace curtains stood still in the heavy heat. The stagnant chemical stained air-in all its familiarity- had plastered a smile on the girl's still pain-stricken face.

Another motionless hour spent cross legged on the burnt orange carpet, and she was released to the bathroom sink. Cool water washed away the white solution. After many minutes she didn't even bother to count under the dryer, she could see the results of her mother's tedious work; her kinky curls were now soft spans of blackened cotton candy like waves.

She stood in front of the mirror, admiring her newborn reflection. Running combs and clips through her hair- she introduced each new style complete with name and complex backstories to the crowd of magazine cut-out friends that plastered her walls.

Today she decided she would be "Amber", a style she imagined was half up, half down, with a simple hair clip in the back. Her birthstone was Amber, she always thought it there was a unique beauty in the way it covered things up, preserving them and making them more valuable, even if they weren't. Amber was a

generally agreeable girl. In the more active parts of her imagination- her hair was soft brown, both to the touch and in color; her eyes were that perfect hazel shade that couldn't be determined from just a quick look; and her skin was at least three shades lighter than the girl who mirrored her.

She dressed herself in a white, slightly wrinkled button-up blouse and a khaki-colored skirt, left overs from old school uniform. She dabbed on a small bit of peach lip balm on her lips, but decided the shine made her lips look bigger than they should be. Amber's lips wouldn't be so big.

In her final moments of preparation, her mother entered the room, dangling between her pointer-finger and thumb a pair of small pearl earrings.

"They always brought me good luck."

Her mother pressed them into the girl's palm, she subsequently began gripping them so tightly in her hand that she could feel the sharpness of the ends piercing into her skin. It was as though her mother knew that Amber would have pearl earrings.

"You look so pretty, you'll do great," her mother said, adjusting her blue silk scarf on her own head. She started walking to the car. The girl followed, the frail screen door creaked to a close behind them.

For the first time, the girl enjoyed the all too familiar drive. The feel of racing air sending strikes of wind through her hair. Four of her mother's Praise and Worship songs later, they arrived at the medical center. The mother placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead and smoothed down loose hairs that must've sprung up against the breeze. Her daughter's solemn expression spoke the volumes of unnecessary apologies, and through similar soft smiles, they wished one another luck. The girl watched her mother make her way through the revolving glass door, she fished the earrings out of her purse pocket and fastened them in her ears. There was an unfamiliar feeling of pride as she took a final look into the rearview mirror and started back onto the highway.

"Ms. Shawn.,um I'm not really sure I know how to pronounce your name," the man began after he sat down at the dark oak desk before her. His nameplate read Mr. Jones, the same as her own; he could have just called her that.

"It's Shaunice, Shawn like you said, and the last part is pronounced eece, like Tyrese, or um Reese's

you know like the candy?" she pressed harder through her smile, but his face didn't read entertained. She tucked a piece of her hair that hadn't been loose and shifted in her chair.

"I have to be honest with you, Ms. Jones; I see here that you don't have any previous experience."

The man's eyes were probably the bluest eyes she'd ever seen -she couldn't stop staring at them- so when he moved his gaze from the paper he was holding, which supposed was her resume, she just assumed that he had questioned her.

"Can you repeat the question, sir?" She looked embarrassed.

"There was no question, just a remark about your priors." He snapped up a red pen from the mug on his desk that read: "World's Best Dad," and wrote something on the paper.

She traced the room, looking for pictures of the World's Best Family. She didn't find any. He furrowed his brow, taking in her lack of attention. He cleared his throat. Her dark brown eyes darted back to his topaz toned pair.

"Well Ms. Jones, I did tell my assistant, Candace to only call in candidates with prior retail experience." He was leaning back in his seat now and had taken his attention completely away from her to a leather bound appointment book on his desk.

"We just simply don't have time to train someone for this position right now; we're short-staffed and looking to start someone within the week."

His words came through so rushed that she could hardly believe that he'd said them.

"Of course, I do," she said, trying to not read disappointed. "If you're ever looking for anyone later, please keep me in mind, I could really use the work."

"Will do, be sure to grab a card and check back in with us in six months."

He motioned to the business cards on the edge of his desk, as she reached for one, he had already began to rise and was making his way to the door. She grabbed her purse from the floor, and walked to meet him there with another fabricated smile.

"Sorry for the rush, I've had interviews all day. But thanks for your time," he said, with a hand leading her back into the hallway. He waited for her to walk out and shut himself back into the office, without so much as a handshake.

With the extra time she decided to do some window shopping. Back on the sales floor she watched faces of the customers- how their eyes lit up, as they floated around the racks, shelves and displays of commercial possibility. She found herself floating alongside them; she imagined again that she was Amber. Amber would have money to shop somewhere like this, Amber would probably frequent this store. The sales staff would ask Amber if she needed assistance promptly upon her arrival, but she wouldn't, because Amber wouldn't need help.

Immediately she was drawn to the store's plethora of designer handbags, she began to compare the new styles to her own. Hers was about five years old; the faux leather was beginning to fray around the bottom, from constantly being carelessly thrown to the ground. One of the straps had broken a couple months ago; it was now secured with a safety pin. Sometimes the safety pin would give, if she carried a lot of stuff. In the few moments she had allowed herself to imagine receiving a job here, she had decided that she would use her store discount to purchase a new purse.

The smell of real leather was intoxicating. She found herself unwittingly, physically inhaling the scent of the bags. She felt the need to touch them- noting the differences between the slick shiny patent leather, the unique textures of snake and alligator prints, and the fabric she came to know today as "pony hair" that was bristly or smooth, depending on the way your hand moved across it.

Her fingers were drifting along the stitch of an embroidered, brown leather satchel, when she felt eyes on her. There was a lady-about ten feet away, readjusting the last bag she had held. She decided that maybe she wouldn't touch them anymore, she would just look.

All around were colors ready for summer wear: cheery yellows, stark sophisticated whites, and even rousing floral prints. A certain blue silk cigarette case stuck out to her. Gravitating towards it, she walked over in a rush; the side of her own handbag knocked a very expensive clutch from its position on display. She reached over to pick it up. In the mirror across from the display she could see the same sales lady, no more than two feet away from her. Now feeling rushed, she picked up the clutch and placed it back on the on the rustic-style, vintage suitcase it had been resting on.

The lady waited no longer than a few seconds after she'd walked away to re-adjust it. Sensing that her focused attention to the cigarette case would certainly provoke a conversation with the snarky looking

associate, she decided that maybe she would venture off and come back later.

As she walked away she watched the sales lady retreat back to her cash register. Now positioned safely across the store she had a good look at the woman; she was tall, or maybe she was just wearing high-heels, it was hard to tell. She had a pair of beautiful full lips which she pursed tightly, coated with a thick lacquer of red. The girl could never pull off red lipstick. The lady's pantsuit was very form fitting, she was showing a bit of cleavage, only enhanced by the soft curls that sidled down the sides of her long neck. Her ears had a slight glimmer; she must be wearing diamond earrings.

She was what the girl's younger brother would've referred to affectionately as a high yellow. She was the sort of girl, that the boys she had attended high school with would've fawned over- she would receive several invitations to prom- she would rescind them all and show up with the quarterback from a rival school. This lady walked in a shade of beauty that had tormented the girl throughout her adolescence. In middle school and most of high school she had spent years returning that torment through harsh words and undeserving physical tolls. There had been a time when she would've hated her, but now in the shadow of rejection she could do no more than envy her.

The girl shifted her attention to a rack of pantsuits for a few moments; she was taken aback by their prices, and decided she was probably no safer from sales staff in this part of the store than she had been earlier. A quick glance over and she discovered the purse lady seemed very busy at her cash register now- a customer was trying to return something, and she looked disgruntled. Maybe she was too preoccupied to follow her around her section.

The silk of the cigarette case was begging to be touched. She could only think of how it matched her mother's head scarf nearly flawlessly. Her mother would love it at first sight; there was nothing she loved more in the world than to have things to match. The sapphire blue material was so sleek and taut on the case that it was cool to the touch. She rubbed the fabric against her warm cheek; it was a very nice case, very nice indeed. She held it up higher and watched the way the fluorescent light dance across it, like the early morning sun on a placid pool.

Suddenly the selfish thoughts she had allowed herself to have of owning a designer purse were all but forgotten and replaced with visions of a genuine smile on her mother's face. The sight of her clinging to

something new and undoubtedly beautiful- the glow of every ivory tooth being shown through her purpled lips.

“Ma’am, excuse me...Ma’am!” the saleslady was now striding towards her purposefully, “could you please refrain from rubbing the silk, if it stains you’d have to buy it, and we wouldn’t want that now would we?” With a singular motion she plucked the case from the girl’s hands and placed it back on the shelf. Clearly satisfied with herself, she allowed a smirk to cross her caramel face and retreated back to her position behind the register.

There had been a time when every synapse inside the girl would’ve shot off into a fury. A time when every ear would’ve been filled with four letter words and indignant accusations, but that girl had been silenced. It hadn’t happened with the weight of the day but with the unrelenting reality of the last year and the sheer uncertainty of the months that lay before her. Without so much as an eye roll or the smack of her lips, she returned to the car.

Back in the store’s parking without thinking she lit a cigarette, rolled down the windows, and fed the key into the ignition. The engine groaned, and the car pattered back onto the highway.

She finished her cigarette just before arriving at the medical center; the car clock read an hour before her mother was usually out. For a moment she considered going in and waiting for her but she decided against it. Instead she let her hair down from its clip, removed the earrings and sat staring desolately out into the well maintained grounds.

Her mother’s eyes were gleaming with hope, as she eased into the passenger’s seat of the car quite a while later.

“How did it go?” she asked as soon as her seat belt was fastened.

“Not so good, they were looking for someone with more experience. Said they didn’t have time to train right now.”

“Oh no baby, well ain’t that a damn shame.”

Everything laid in silence on the drive back; both pairs of eyes fastened to the windshield and the final

moments of sun.

“Baby, did you remember to wear the earrings I gave you?” her mother asked, looking over and feeling at the girl’s bare ears.

“Aw no, I musta’ forgot them in my bag,” she lied. Re-using her fake smile she said “Those probably woulda helped, huh?”

“Child, I don’t know much in this world but I know those earrings work. And prayer works,” she said this matter-of-factly and with an undefeated smile.

A moment passed before she spoke again, this time her tone was nearly solemn. “Your daddy might not be workin, this chemo might not be workin. But faith, and them lucky earrings works.”

The girl’s eyes turned to her mother now, she watched her untie the blue scarf. She watched the fluidity of it, flowing like a stream into her still, dark lap. For the first time it felt as though she really saw her mother. The smooth curve of her bald head in the growing night reminded her of the onyx stones she had studied in Geology. She recalled how the elderly teacher-known for his hippie like mannerisms-in a practiced joking manner suggested that his classroom should be carved from black Onyx to absorb the negative energies that his students tended to bring. Black Onyx represented strength and perseverance.

In the rearview mirror, she studied herself, her real self. Beneath the manipulated forms of her beauty, perhaps she was never meant to be Amber at all. She was carved from her mother, a beautiful black Onyx.