

## Mansfield

It was a cold and breezy Friday night when Malik and I set out to raid Kyle's man-cave. Kyle wasn't home yet but Malik needed immediate relief from managing the behavioral therapy business he and his wife Loretta own. They're together all day, every day, Monday through Monday and I was his get out of jail free card for the night.

I parked my rental, jet-lagged—splash of pink and purple sunset radiating behind palm fronds swishing in the inhalation and exhalation of a pending night sky had me nostalgic and before I could pull up the parking break, Malik was already out of his house, shoulders to his ears, fast walking toward the black Porche Cayenne Coupe we called the Bat Mobile parked in his driveway. His head jerked up and down the street for the threat against our night of cards.

“Come on, slow ass!” he yelled, disappearing behind tinted windows.

I scanned the length of the street, shivering in the cool air, looking for that threat, wondering from which direction Loretta's SUV might emerge.

It had become obvious that the novelty of *me* had simply lost its allure—the persuasive power of my presence, expired, my visits back home, impotent and suspect. We had acknowledged as much the last time we played cards in Kyle's man-cave six months prior, how there used to be a time when Bid Whist could be summoned with little to no notice, on any day, at any time. All that needed to be said was *Julian's in town!* and wives would sign get out of jail free cards enthusiastically and without question. The novelty of me was trust, a byproduct of quality time strategically spent with each of my homeboy's wives during backyard crab boils, Super Bowl, NBA, boxing and Juneteenth gatherings, anniversaries and baby showers, kids' birthdays,

Memorial Days and civilian friendly sorority events, presenting to each wife a version of me that didn't frequent strip clubs, fuck "Ho's" nor did crack-y shit. My malt liquor chest beating days were long gone. I tactically sided with the wives when they made funny yet passive aggressive jokes about the speed to which certain household chores or home repair tasks were completed. I made sure to clown: *The grass ain't cut itself in a while eh, Malik? Fuck you laughing at, Kyle? I heard you started a compost experiment in your gutters.*

George and Weezy Jefferson economics was to blame for this slide from Saint to Sinner if you believe Malik: my recent tenured faculty appointment had elevated me into the coveted upper-black-middle class tax bracket. I could afford frequent trips back home to L.A., resulting in crack of dawn tattered, beer-scotch-cigar-THC stained returns on those get out of jail free cards. *Julian's in town!* became dog whistle for wayward husbands recapturing the good 'ole days. My conversational check-in's with the wives became self induced interrogations: "Oh, what are y'all up to for the night?" "Oh, back in town? So soon?"

I crossed the street, awed by Malik's front yard. A top hat, scarf wearing, carrot nosed, artificial snowman stood in one corner of a lawn blanketed with white cotton fabric thin enough for Malik's Bermuda grass to breathe and receive light. Multi-colored Christmas lights lined the gutters of his roof and coursed through the evergreen shrubs bordering both sides of his two-story brick home. Two steel wired, mechanical reindeer bobbed their heads and ate grass through the snow. Distracted, I stepped on something crunchy and squishy. Along the sidewalk was a line of snails, large and small, their miniature eyes paid me no mind as they made their slow pilgrimage toward Malik's white covered plain. I lifted my foot. I'd stepped on three. On the bottom of my shoe, bits and pieces of shell mixed with bubbling mucus and the embryonic-like

flesh. The others pressed on, their shinny trails glimmered behind them.

I smeared the bottom of my shoe on the white fabric and picked up the part of a shell still intact. A perfect lubricated spiral. I walked to the Bat Mobile, absentmindedly rubbing the shell between thumb and forefinger before pocketing it.

The Bat Mobile's interior is every boy and man's wet dream of a car. Black plush leather seats caress your ass so well you blush. Dashboard and center consol lighting imbued Malik's dark skin blue. I looked in his direction. Hadn't seen nor talked to the brother in months. I had shit to say but he was busy dialing Kyle from the steering wheel. Scrolling across the face of the car stereo was the artist's name and song playing, Kendrick Lamar, busy letting the world know that Pirus and Crips might kill him before song's end and before I could really nod my head to it, a Barbie doll's arm stuck me in the ass. I shifted my weight away from Barbie's arm and stepped on Dora the Explorer.

*"Hola, I'm Dora," she said. "We did it!"*

Malik looked over at Dora and smiled.

"Throw that shit in the back, Croz."

I put both dolls in a child safety seat overflowing with my goddaughter's other belongings: Dora the Explorer lunch pails, Dora the Explorer dvds, Dora the Explorer shoes, markers, miniature Dora's and one lonesome Sesame Street Emo along for the ride.

We gave each other dap.

"Good to see you, Croz," he said, backing toward the end of the driveway. I buckled-up and took a good look at him. Decades ago it used to be me picking him up, heading out to some high school dance or club lax enough to admit minors. His father usually answered the door, same

post office uniform still on, same eyes bloodshot from a sixty-hour workweek, same air of protective vigilance necessary to raise his four young black boys in a world fearful of young black boys; beer in one hand, shaking my hand with the other, a smile, always a smile, never a negative word, and as Malik steered the Bat Mobile North, he looked just like his father, dark brown skin, five o'clock shadow and a bit of salt sprouting from that pepper. Malik stopped at a stop sign. I realized how much I missed talking to the brother. I mean, really talked.

“How’s my god-baby?”

“She’s cool man,” Malik said slowly. Our heads nodded to the chorus: Kendrick was getting interrogated by Crips. “You should get one, Croz,” he said, looking down the street through his rear view. “Fuck the other shit though.”

Kyle’s phone rang through Bat Mobile speakers, fading Kendrick to silence.

“Malik, what’s up?”

We were in full motion. Parked cars, Christmas holiday adorned one story, two story homes, condos, and apartment buildings blurred by in the way you’d imagine a warp speed spaceship might glide past distant stars, time and space.

“When you gettin’ off work, nigga?” Malik asked. We turned onto La Tijera Boulevard headed North. The sun was gone. Break-lights bathed us red.

“Shit. Probably not ‘till 6.”

“Goddamn, motherfuckuh! You work too damn much.”

“Money won’t make itself, right?”

“Who you tellin, ” Kyle said. He mumbled something to someone on his side and then,

“Wait, who said that?”

“Kyle, what’s up!”

“Daaamn, is that *Julian Cross*? My brother! Didn’t know you were in town. *Cooooo*. We need to check out this new cigar spot ‘round the corner from me, it’s...”

“Hey, hey, hey, focus! This is crucial. Kyle, we coming through,” Malik said.

“Okay, okay. Yeah. Uh. The back gate’s open. Post up ‘till I get there.”

“Your wife home?” Malik asked.

“Probably. Maybe.” Malik and I gave each other the look. “Don’t matter. I’ll be there soon,” Kyle said, mumbling something else to whomever on his side again as we stopped at a traffic light. “Who’s the fourth?”

I checked my phone for a text from our possible fourth player. Five tiny paragraphs stared at me. I’d stopped and started, stopped and started a text reply to my ex, Staci. She was a married woman by then with three kids. I needed to leave well-enough alone but apparently I couldn’t. I could. Maybe I didn’t want to? I deleted the paragraphs.

“Dupre’ says he *thinks* he can make it,” I said, flicking my thumb across my cell’s smooth surface. “Got some church thing to do first.” I scrolled through a list of other texts. “Hue hasn’t gotten back with me yet.”

“Anybody talk to Ant?” Kyle again.

I closed my eyes, shook my head. To Malik’s credit, he paused...

“Fuck, Ant! How’s he gonna get to your house? He never has anything to put on the drink. Never has anything to put on the grub. But always has money for that tired ass back alley bullshit weed he brings with him. Always puckering his goddamn lips up for my good shit. It’s a tax!”

Kyle and I laughed. I can never tell if Malik is as pissed off as he sounds when Ant’s name

comes up. Kyle's laughter through Bat Mobile speakers made the tension between Malik and Ant funnier to me somehow. Malik was in full animation mode, leaning forward, torso restrained by his seat belt strap, his arms gestured with each mention of a specific tax.

"It's a drink tax, a food tax, a weed tax and a gas tax! It's always a motherfucking tax with his ass! One of y'all can pick his ass up from his Mom's crib. I ain't doing it! Fuck that. I ain't doing it." My abs felt like they'd done 1000 crunches.

"Crozz," Malik said, making a left on Centinela. "I hire and train that motherfuckuh to do some simple behavioral assessments and you know what his fat ass does?" Of course I knew what he did. It's a familiar story but it's always funny when Malik retells it.

"No. What?" The Bat Mobile made a right into the La Dera shopping center parking lot.

"The motherfuckuh has one of his rachet-ass females take him to the school site, right? And he's arguing with her ass in the goddamn school parking lot, Crozz! Kids are walking *byyyyy*, telling their teachers that two crazy looking black people are fighting in a car, he's *laaaate* for the assessment and to make a long story short nigga, after Loretta *buuugs* the fuck out of me to fire his ass, I get him *another* job making more money at a nonprofit agency, and the motherfuckuh gets caught with some *porn* shit on his office computer. Nigga! His fucking...office...computer! Crozz. It's a children's organization!" Malik's hands were off the steering wheel, palms facing upward where his eyes rolled.

That part of the story was new to me.

"Now, Loretta's yapping in my ear every goddamn chance she gets with that 'I told you so' bullshit and to make shit worse, the director and Loretta are sorority sisters and you *know* they tell each other *eeeverygoddamnthng*. Crozz. I wanted to fuck that nigga up so bad the last time I

saw his ass...”

In between laughs, Kyle said, “Look, man. *I’ll* give him a call. We need a fourth.”

We let Kyle go and drove through the parking lot enroute to Ralph’s. We passed the outside patio of the Black Starbucks filled with more black folk I’d ever seen in ten years of living in San Antonio. Standing and sitting at patio tables and chairs, playing chess, smoking, eating coffee cakes and cookies, drinking coffee and tea, I bore witness to an amalgamation of Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, Booker T’s middle class; beneficiaries of King and Malcolm crucifixions; Huey P. revolutionary dream children and Obama post-baby boomer futurists: Africans, niggers, coloreds, Negroes, Black Americans, Afro-Americans, niggas, niggahs, African Americans and just plain ‘ole Black people with short hair, long hair, weaves, bald heads, light skin, brown skin, dark skin, blue black skin in shirts and ties, Levis and Khaki pants sagging, baseball hats turned forwards, backwards, sideways, bowties, vests, derbies, multi-colored kufis, Michael Hors, Target, Dolce Gabbana, Marshals, tight skirts over g-strings or no strings at all on no ass, a whole lotta ass, high heels, Jordons, Nikes, Staci Adams, bare footed, nerds, knuckle heads, hustlers, business men and women, a sprinkle of Laker jerseys, way too many Clipper jerseys, Raider skullies and a few wannabe hard looking youngun’s trying to stare us down through the tinted windows of the Bat Mobile.

I will come back to that same shopping center a week later, and park across from the Black Starbucks. I will sit in my rental like I’m at a drive-in theatre, watching a black past, present and future. And in the face of all that blackness, I’ll think not of Staci, my ex, but of her white mother, her wit, her profound understanding, and I’ll wonder if I had her number, would I call her? I’ve only met her once, at the abortion clinic. I’ll wonder, “what if” I’d been more engaged

in Staci's final decision. I'll think of Staci's asshole father, the brother who once tried to set Staci up with another man while Staci and I were still together. Staci's father. Yeah. *Fuck him.*

Malik and I were in and out of Ralph's with the quickness, tossing two bags of Hawaiian B-B-Q potato chips, a twelve pack of Stella Artois and six artificial fire logs into the trunk. We entered the swollen red veins of L.A. traffic again, flowing Northbound on La Cienega and then Eastbound on Slauson, bumping Public Enemy's first album. While Chuck D was busy telling anyone who'd listen, *Your Gonna Get Yours*, I thought about those five tiny paragraphs and reached for the volume. I wanted those paragraphs back. I wanted to send that message but I needed to talk about them first. Once the bids started going around the card table, there would be no time for reflection and confession, just surface shit, laughing, drinking, smoking and talking shit around and away from the guilt of leaving the heavy psychological lift to Staci. Had my fingertip on that button, about to lower the volume of one thing and turn up the volume on the tension inside my chest before the Bid Whist shit talking began, but the familiar *whoop-whoop* from behind us overwhelmed my thoughts.

Standard procedures were in order.

Malik pulled into the nearest populated and well-lit Target parking lot. He lowered all the tinted windows. We pulled our wallets out of our back pockets and placed them on the shallow ledge of the Bat Mobile dash and before Malik's hands were on twelve and three, my arms were outstretched, hands on the dash just above the glove compartment.

Officer One crept toward the driver side and Officer Two was off to the right of me. He looked young. Might have been a rookie. Maybe not.

"How you doing tonight, sir?" Officer One asked Malik.

“Fine sir, and yourself?”

“Not too bad, sir. Driver’s license, registration and proof of insurance please, sir.”

“They’re in my wallet. I’m going to get my wallet. My wallet is on the dashboard.”

Malik’s eyes never left the officer’s eyes. His three o’clock hand reached slowly for his wallet on the dash and then his 12 o’clock hand produced documents that Officer One nodded at and took back to the police car. Flashing shards of red and blue light stab my retinas through the rear and sideview mirrors, so I looked toward Officer Two. Officer Two chewed on a fingernail and spit it out. I lowered my hands slowly to my knees and stared at them, and then I stared at him again. The collective *Him*. The latest iteration of *Him*. I’d experienced Him before many times throughout my life in Los Angeles. I knew Him by the patent leather boots he wore or was this version of Him old school, preferring to wear corframs? Real dressy, public relations mind-tricks? I knew Him by his black wool polyester blended pants and black shirt stretching over his bullet proof vest that always gave Him an intimidating bulky barrel chested look. I knew Him by his 20 lbs of dormant weaponry and his smooth, slick, black Samuel Brown belt that held his department issued black 9mm Glock. His taser, attached to the other side of that Sam Brown, could deliver 50,000 volts of electrical disconnect-your-muscle-tissue-from-your-nervous-system shock, and the night stick on that Sam Brown, I wondered if the night stick on that Sam Brown was the plastic, wooden or metal kind and I further wondered if he preferred the metal kind because he could break through a car window easier with a metal night stick and I wondered if doing so would enable him to drag that body out of the car, just to be a dick, or to protect himself, protect his partner, just trying to get home safe and alive to have dinner, or kill two niggers *before* dinner? I knew Him by the various small black cases attached to that Sam Brown.

A case for handcuffs, another for extra rounds of Winchester hollow points, a case for the 4-inch long, 2 - 4 ounce container of pepper spray mixed with a little tear gas on that Sam Brown. The wire to a radio handset, endless and continuous, spiraled up from that Sam Brown to the front of Officer Two's shirt. I knew Him by the flashlight he'd shined in every car I've ever owned in Los Angeles.

Officer Two chewed a nail on his other finger, saw me looking and nodded. I nodded back. He spat.

"Thank you, Mr. Adams," Officer One said. "You have a good evening."

Standard procedures.

The officers, their car, the lights, the Sam Browns, drove away, gone but still there, splinters in our subconscious until we pulled up in front of Kyle's three level home that sat on a steep hillside off Slauson Avenue, on Mansfield. The third floor and front side gate were at street level.

We pushed open the unlocked wooden gate. It let out a long loud cry for WD-40. We looked up toward the open lit windows of Kyle's home, searching, carrying our bagged goods down three flights of wooden stairs to the back yard where there was a view below of break-lights and headlights, red and white blood cells alive in the artery of Slauson and La Brea on a Friday night with veins twisting, converging into and diverging away toward the four directions of the city, City of Angels, city that purged me, or did I abandon it, ran away from it, decades ago, in awe of it that cold night, a pulsating behemoth of diversity, spread out, flat, nestled by ocean, mountain and desert and laced with those shimmering white and red asphalt veins filed with life, death, and possibility.

Kyle's backyard was divided. Half of it paved concrete and that's where we set up shop, near

the outdoor wood burning fire pit. The rest of the yard was fresh cut St. Augustine grass and gardenia bushes that lined the wooden fence and reminded me of how beautiful life could smell. Two swaying palm trees bordered my view. The view alone was worth six figures. No wonder Kyle worked so fucking much. Malik started on the fire pit, lifting the top and situating the artificial fire logs. I looked up and saw several house lights on and a shadow. It vanished behind drawn curtains.

My phone vibrated like crazy with email notices from my graduate students or so I thought. I checked my phone. Saw another text from Dupre' and another text from my ex, Staci. I started reading it. 'Till this day I don't know how she got my number. Hadn't seen her in at least twenty years. We talked on the phone days before I touched down at LAX. She told me how, ten years prior, the night before her wedding, she tried to call me. Said she needed closure. Closure, she said. We broke up during our senior year in college and ten years after our break-up she needed closure. Closure. Our relationship was intense. The afternoon I spent in the abortion clinic waiting room with her Moms was even more intense. Closure. Staci's Moms told jokes that day. Asked me about my major. I liked her. I hated her husband, Staci's father. *Fuck him.*

Staci's Mom looked around the waiting room, rested a soft hand on my wrist and whispered to me: "No one's making eye contact."

I was the only man in a silent room with no empty seats. No music. Low lighting. Lots of plants. Staci and other stoic figures glided in and out, in and out of the room. I saw emotions with no physical bodies. Ghosts really. Black ghosts. White ghosts. Asian ghosts. Latino ghosts. A diaspora of ghosts. On the ledge of the front desk window was a bell that no one rang. No one worked that desk. To the right side of the front desk window was a door that never stopped

opening and closing, opening and closing. I recognized Staci's face when it was her turn to come out of that door but I didn't recognize, her, in the weeks and months that followed.

Malik opened a plastic grocery bag that wasn't a Ralph's bag and out of that bag he pulled out an elaborate Loretta defensive ploy: a Fruity Pebbles cereal box, and from that cereal box he pulled out a gallon sized zip lock plastic bag and inside that bag was a wrinkled brown paper bag. He tossed the paper bag to me. Inside was Malik's dispensary membership card, his "prescription" papers and an assortment of orange medicinal containers labeled, *bin Laden Kush*, *Afghan Sticky-Icky* and *O.G. Obamacare* respectively.

"Which one you wanna start off with, Croz?"

"Shit. None of 'em."

"What? Fuck that, Croz. You on vacation?"

"Dude," I said, tossing the bag back. "That's not the same shoe box weed I used to find in Mom's closet."

Malik made a few more middle school peer pressure moves but my grown ass man defenses were strong. I was determined to stay sober and on top of things, to see things the way they really were. I picked up four folding chairs from the side of the house and placed them around the fire pit. Its flames breathed and licked the night. Malik found a piece of flat plywood, sat and used the plywood as a base for rolling. He rolled two thick joints with assembly line efficiency and started on one. Apparently, it was the end of a long week at the office. He released a curvy stream of smoke into the air and looked at me. I passed the snail shell to him.

Malik coughed, damn near gagged, looked at each side of the shell with a head tilted curious expression.

“Did you know Staci pledged AKA graduate chapter a while back?” he asked, leaning forward and passing the shell back.

I put it back in my pocket.

“AKA?”

“AKA. That’s what Loretta said. They talk, you know.”

I connected a few dots and felt naked. The wooden gate screamed from up above for WD-40 again. I heard multiple footsteps shuffling down the wooden staircase. One set sounded heavier than the other.

Kyle stepped into view first. The only Jamaican I ever knew without a Jamaican accent by way of Nebraska. He carried a bag of marked “buffalo wings” in one hand and a four pack of Sri Lankan Lion Stout in the other.

“*Kyle!*” we yelled, standing, me, relieved. Ant came into view next.

“*Annnnnnnnt!*” I said.

Malik exhaled Obamacare.

Talk about the things he carried. In one hand Ant held his patented large styrofoam cup filled with gin and Gatorade no doubt and slung over one shoulder was his signature satchel, a dusty beat-up black backpack containing all the essentials he claimed necessary for the Ho’s: Old Spice roll on deodorant, ribbed condoms, a 1.75 liter bottle of Seagrams Extra Dry Gin, a short sleeve of styrofoam cups, two or three packs of Lawry’s dry taco seasoning, packets of hot sauce and honey from random fast food spots, and an assortment of bootleg dvd movies. I embraced Kyle first.

“You looking good doc,” Kyle said, hugging Malik next and then heading toward the sliding

glass door of the man-cave. Ant sat all the things he carried down and embraced me. He'd gotten bigger since the last time I saw him.

"What's good, Ant?"

"Can't call it," he said stepping back, looking me up and down with a half smile. "Just trying to stay ahead and find..." his eyes cut toward Malik who was off to the side, lighting the joint up again. "Just trying to handle my business."

"Don't whisper motherfuckuh. I hear yo ass."

Ant walked over to Malik. Malik stared at him and exhaled more Obamacare out the side of his mouth. They were silent for what felt like minutes. They hugged each other.

"You know I should fuck you up right now, right?"

"I know man. I know."

They separated.

Ant reached for the joint.

Malik moved it out of reach.

"Oh *helllll* no motherfuckuh. Reach in that hobo satchel and get some of that sticks and seed bullshit you smoke."

"Quiet clown," Ant said, receiving the joint and putting it to his lips.

"Kyle," Malik said too loudly, looking up toward the windows of the house and then whispered. "Come hit this shit."

Kyle ignored him as per usual and waved us in.

We entered the warmth of the man-cave, sacred space enshrined with a wall sized flat screen T.V., a cracked black pleather couch on three peg legs, a small brown mini-fridge that rattled and

should have been thrown away with the microwave that sat on top of it, the microwave that rattled and vibrated when set to any thing higher than three minutes. A card table that wobbled and doubled as a domino table sat in the middle of the off, off, off white shag carpet where crooked stacks of Xbox and Playstation video games leaned in the four corners of the sacred space and to the left of the fridge-microwave tower was a bathroom that, as far back as I could remember, never had a roll of toilet tissue in it. Ever. A lone framed black and white photo of a fine-ass afro'd Pam Grier pointing a sawed-off shotgun at someone was the only art that graced the bare white walls of that sacred space.

Beer bottles clinked against each other as Kyle filled the mini-fridge with the beers he and Malik bought. Kyle vowed to make another run soon. The rest of us unfolded rickety metallic folding chairs and wiped down the table. Ant sat, produced a deck of cards from his satchel and began shuffling them. The usual game of musical chairs began to determine who would suffer the consequence of being Ant's partner. Even if you and Ant won, there would be no end to his *why-didn't-you-play-the-this-the-that-or-the-other* post game critique that would result in a loud debate about whose style of play was best and would end with, "*Fuck you nigga, didn't we just win?*"

Kyle lost the game of musical chairs because he was busy pouring Hawaiian chips into a big plastic bowl. He looked up from pouring chips, saw his fate and mumbled fuck or shit. Malik laughed and told him *that's what you get for picking his ass up in the first place* to which Ant said *quiet clown* and began dealing everyone a hand and then the six card Kitty. Kyle put a Stella near Malik, a Lion Stout near me and nothing near Ant who was near the bottom of his patented styrofoam cup concoction. Hands of cards fanned in front of contemplative faces, eyes raking

across the tops of those cards, looking for strengths and weakness, possibilities, ways to take the bid and run that bid, ways to deceive the opponent yet support one's partner if one's partner had the better hand and organizing those cards appropriately for the most favorable scenario. Ant pushed the Kitty to the middle of the table and turned over the top card, the Little Joker, a sight that set off a round of *mmmmmmmmmm*'s, *hmmmmmmmm*'s, and *hmphs* around the table, guaranteeing that the bids would be high and someone might get caught in a lie. I had to bid first. My hand was shit, so I bid a three-low to let my partner, Malik, know my hand was shit. Really shit, even with the Little Joker, so he'd get no help from me if he was seriously thinking about taking the bid. Kyle's hand must have been shit too because he bid a four no trump, which let everyone know that the Big Joker wasn't in his hand. Malik smiled and pointed an accusing finger at Ant which had to mean that the other joker was also in the Kitty or in Ant's hand, so Malik was gonna make Ant work for the bid. Malik bid a five no trump. Ant looked at his cards, frowned and gave Kyle a disappointed look. Silence.

"Don't be scared," Kyle said.

"Oh, wow," I said, slapping my cards on the table.

"Well I be goddamn," Malik said, folding his arms, eyes wide. "Why don't you call the motherfuckuh up on his cell and tell the nigga to take the bid?"

"What? I'm just saying." Kyle. The bad actor.

"You just talking across the table is what you doing," I said.

"Quiet clowns. I taught you two this game twenty years ago and you still haven't learned your lessons," Ant said, eyes on his cards, strategizing, smiling, confident all of a sudden.

"And that's where your Whist skills have stayed, stagnant and deep in the 90's," I responded.

“Fool, I’m the best.”

“The best receiver of fucking phone calls from across the table is what you are. That’s the only way you win,” Malik said. He pulled out his cell phone and mimed a call: “Hello, partner? Partner! Don’t be scared! Go ahead and take the bid. I got yo back! I got yo back! Bid a six!”

“What? I didn’t talk across the board,” Kyle struggled to say, took a swig and sprayed Stella across the table in a gut clutching fit.

“*Daaaaaaamnnnn, dawg!*” Everybody pushed away from the beer spittled table. Kyle sat there laughing.

“Are you chilled already? How is that possible? Glad you don’t have to drive nowhere. Shit.”

“He gotta walk up those steep-ass stairs though.”

“What he gotta do,” Malik said slowly, his voice thick with indica, “is get an elevator in this bitch ‘cause I gotta take a massive shit, and God knows there ain’t no fucking toilet paper in *that* damn bathroom.”

And on and on it went, joaning, playing the dozens, bagging, drinking, eating chips, winning some, losing some, who’s the best, who’s the worst, who’s skills have diminished, playing to the best out of ten games and then it was time for a smoke break.

The four of us emptied out onto the patio and took a seat around the fire pit. New fire logs were added to the pit and lit. Thankfully, Kyle produced three choice cigars from the inside of his jacket for me to choose from and I chose my favorite, the Asylum 13, a Nicaraguan snub nosed 50 gauge maduro, firm and moist from Kyle’s humidor no doubt. Ant reached into his satchel, dug out his Seagrams Gin bottle and poured into his styrofoam cup in generous gluck-glucks until the bottle gasped empty.

Malik said, *tobacco products are bad for you*, pulled out the second joint, looked at me, Kyle, and then to Ant who was already leaning forward from his seat in Malik's direction.

“Why don't you rub that magic satchel and make a wish?”

“Quiet, clown.”

Malik and Ant hit the joint and exhaled like chimneys. The joint came my way and I passed it to Kyle which resulted in more mediocre middle school peer pressure directed at me and to everyone's surprise, Kyle took the joint and hit it.

We clutched our pearls.

Palm trees swayed as I watched the inhalation and exhalation of the night sky pull twisted braids of dense pure white smoke from Kyle's lungs like he was giving birth from his throat. My eyes tracked the spiraling column upward until the silky white braids contrasted with the silver night clouds that reflected the city lights of Los Angeles. I thought of my great grandmother, the midwife, famous throughout Simpson, Mississippi for the all silver instruments she used to bring babies to this side of the world with. I said as much to the fire, feeling as though those words were pulled out of me like smoke from Kyle's lungs. Kyle passed the joint to Malik.

Unfamiliar stories began.

What the stories had in common: Kyle, Ant and Malik were in the delivery room for the birth of their daughters. All three wives specifically requested that no drugs be used. All three wives wanted natural births. No epidurals. Later, all three wives *begged* for epidurals.

Kyle was in the delivery room with his mother-in-law watching the tocodynamometer display of each impending contraction, announcing the birth of his baby girl: “Here it comes.”

“Here comes another one!” “Ooo. Here comes a reeeeaally big one.”

“I wish you would be quiet,” his mother-in-law grumbled.

Kyle’s daughter slept on his chest the first night of her life.

Ant’s sisters-in-law were in his delivery room. He and his wife at the time had planned to play Jill Scott’s first CD on his CD player, the same CD they’d listened to religiously during the first tumultuous year of their failed marriage but his sisters-in-law had other plans in mind, opting to sing a combination of gospel songs so off key Ant feared his daughter would be born brain damaged. When it was over, his wife, dazed and covered in sweat, looked up at him holding their child and said, *I always thought you was an ugly motherfucker* before passing out. Ant couldn’t remember if or when he stopped gazing into his baby girl’s eyes that night.

Loretta would not let the doctor touch her when they were in the delivery room. The doctor looked at Malik as if to say, *Are you going to help me out here?* but Malik was more concerned about his daughter. He stood next to the doctor with outstretched arms and upward facing palms ready to catch his baby if the doctor didn’t. When his daughter was finally born, he whispered in her ear: “I will always protect you.”

The men I’d known for a good portion of my life sat silent afterwards. I asked Malik for a light for my cigar and he tossed me the lighter. He stared into my eyes. Sorority sisters tell each other everything he’d said earlier.

I drew cigar smoke into my mouth, exhaled with the City, palm trees, and the night sky.

I thought about Staci’s father.