The Shorties: A Novel

By

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The Board and The Complex

I.

The Lawyer, The Dentist, The Contractor, The Postman, and The Barber walked into The Barber's now boarded up barbershop to devise a plan that would restore their businesses and save their homes. Each man brought their own paperwork: deeds, titles, taxes, high school diplomas, honorable discharge papers, medals, plaques, professional degrees from historically Black colleges; eviction notices accompanied by checks and letters stamped impersonally by a one Mr. Robert Moses, and brown-paper bagged lunches prepared by their wives who were staying with sisters and aunts and mothers in Queens, Brooklyn, and New Jersey. The Lawyer reviewed and discussed and called and complained while The Barber cut and shaved The Dentist, The Contractor, and The Postman, and when the Barber was done he sat in his own chair, tilted his head all the way back and asked The Dentist to check his teeth for cavities, while The Contractor and The Postman played chess and read the newspaper on off-turns to give each other enough space and time to only make good moves. And then they switched, shifted, alternated—chess pieces, newspapers, cavities, contracts, cuts. The Dentist, borrowing The Barber's tools, checked all of the teeth of the mouths of all of the men, and The Lawyer, borrowing the Dentist's tiny glasses checked fine print after fine print, reviewing, discussing, calling, and complaining before ultimately quitting and facing his attention elsewhere.

Elsewhere, The Lawyer examined the checks, all for different amounts because they all had different things and did different things, and all that they had in common was that they had all just lost. The Lawyer told the rest that they had all just lost, and should

take the checks to the banks or to an agent because his specialty was actually divorce and defense, and he'd fail again if he tried to help them buy business space and living space and breathing space elsewhere.

They all grew silent and then The Postman spoke.

"The others fled. Thirty-Minute walk to the nearest train station, my route is empty. All coupons, bills, letters, and packages addressed there are forwarded or returned or forwarded and then returned only to wind up sitting on the shelves of the station like the addresses never belonged to anyone anyway." And then he took his map out of his pocket and tried to show this map and his list of marked out names, black ink scratched across surnames of suburban home owners to the rest of the men; but, was interrupted by the beating and breaking of the boarded up windows.

Four freshly permed boys entered the barbershop and asked if they could sing in exchange for haircuts. "We need it out right now," said The Lead Singer, anxiously raking forward strands of hair that had been so precisely slicked back just seconds ago. "Please," said The Baritone scratching at his neck.

"Sit but please don't sing," The Barber said removing his clippers from The Dentist's cup of mouthwash.

"Thirty-Minute walk to the nearest train station, you say?" said The Lawyer whose eyes had only left the checks momentarily and only to dart disgust at The Tenor, the boy who had begun to hum while waiting for his haircut. "We could pool," he said returning his attention to the men.

"Car-pool or pool money?" Asked The Contractor.

The Barber was on the second boy's head, peering over tiny glasses at the remaining two, over-examining their choices in clothes, hobbies, and haircuts while wondering about their mothers, wondering what type of mother would allow these types of clothes, hobbies, and haircuts during a time like this.

And then he offered this, "What if we build a building and live and work in the building and be in-charge of this building so nothing like this happens again? And I personally will make sure all of the boys have good hairlines and dark-caesars."

The Barber was preoccupied by his own words so he forgot the ins and outs of his occupation and his razor nipped the neck of the boy sitting in his chair, causing a tiny bit of blood to drip down and stain the collar of the boy's white shirt. He intended to pour a glass of hot water but the heat belonged to The State that had already sided with The Planner so the water came out cold and brown. Still, he soaked his razor and wet his thumb to rub the boy's collar which only spread the blood and made the red spot an odd orange instead of clean.

"A housing project?" Asked The Dentist. "Like Moses."

"No," said The Contractor who had been nodding while the Barber was talking, his right fist knocking on the chess board before him, already seeing it, already in agreement. "It'll be something else because it's us doing it. We'll call it something else. We'll be a," and his voice trailed off while he snapped his fingers to search for the words.

The four now bald boys joined in on his snaps, misreading the reason for the sudden burst of rhythm. The Baritone began to begin, but the barbershop's dust and debris and loose hair clogged his throat so he shook his head and turned to The Tenor to take his spot. The tenor caught a glimpse of his collar in the mirror and got distracted

thinking about his mother's forthcoming adverse reaction and eventual rant about her money and her labor and her time and the boy without a role was without a role because he couldn't actually sing, simply there for show because he was very tall and very pretty so The Lead Singer sang by himself. This irritated and irked The Lawyer so he stood, gave The Dentist back his glasses, grabbed The Lead Singer and threw him so very far outside that he landed in one of deeply hollowed-out construction pits that would eventually become The New Highway.

The Lawyer, The Dentist, The Contractor, The Postman and The Barber all took out their brown-paper bags and offered the three remaining boys half of their lunch and construction jobs. The trio, hungry and thinking about each of their mother's time money and labor, agreed to the food and agreed to the work so The Contractor gave them new names—The Accountant, The Electrician, and Thomas.

II.

The men formed The Board to try and form a Complex, housing for all who had been displaced by The New Highway and Thomas, tall pretty and already built for show, was to become the face and therefore needed the most training but had the most difficulty learning, remembering, and believing in both his new name and his occupation so The Barber sat him down in his chair, in front of the mirror, pointed at their reflection there in the mirror and said say, "Hi, my name is Thomas."

"Hi, my name is Thomas," said Thomas.

"Now three times fast, boy"

"Hi, my name is Thomas, Hi, my name is Thomas, Hi, my name is Thomas," said Thomas while removing his penny loafers and sliding into workboots handed to him by The Contractor.

"Now three times slow like each Thomas refers to a different Thomas entirely, if you will."

"Thomas," said Thomas removing his cardigan sweater and trying on for size and fit both The Dentist's white coat and The Lawyer's black blazer.

"Thomas," said Thomas reading The Postman's lists, studying his route against that map, and all of the cities' ordinances.

III.

They placed it near the tides. The Complex—four buildings stacked seven stories high with one to two-bedroom apartments and The Board's businesses, one or two tucked in at the bottom of each individual building, would offer discount divorces, haircuts, and tax preperation; discount braces, cleanings, and fillings; discount handy-work, electrician-work, and carpentry to all its future residents. The Board placed a park with a jungle-gym and eight benches, carved out a pathway that connected each building to each building, using the park as its center, and then imported squirrels and pigeons and skunks from the other side of the highway, and put up signs that said no feeding, no loitering, no bike-riding or running.

And then they invited the people. Because The Board imagined that The So Many would prefer to say, to ask, to talk to beg a Thomas much more than they would prefer to say, to ask, to talk to, to beg, 'Landlords;' The Complex would be in high demand, and because The So Many were displaced in such large numbers, The Board had

to establish admission and living requirements, rules, and regulations—to be objective and honest and fair when turning some of The So Many away.

First preference will be given to secretaries, nurses, cleaning ladies, and kindergarten teachers. Then women with no less than one child and women with no more than five; women with disabled husbands, military husbands, and dead husbands; women whose overall income did not fall too far below the poverty-line and women whose overall income did not exceed twice that of poverty; second-generation immigrant women and first-generation immigrant women with proper paperwork; women with runs in their tights and women with scuffs on their shoes—

Just write Lower-middle-class working mothers, said The Board to Thomas. And then say, To combat the severe inequality facing our community's most vulnerable. And then say, and then everyone else.

First Preference will be given to lower middle-class working mothers to combat the severe inequalities that face our community's most vulnerable members. And then everyone else.

No smoking, barbecuing, personal washers or dryers, personal bottom or top or chain locks. No criminals, convicts, offenders, or the accused. No known gang members, mothers of known gang members, or mothers who used to be gang members themselves. No additional tenant can be an unmarried partner, roommate, cousin, nephew, niece nor mother or parent of the original applicant unless—Did you write unless, Thomas?—Unless brought to Thomas and approved by the Board. All nuclear families welcome. No welfare recipients, princes, princesses, or heirs of this country or any and all others. No

bad credit—street and financial. All income must be reported including but not limited to: child-support, insurance payouts, tax returns, loans, gifts, hand-outs, and coupons.

Thomas, change that to Rent will be based on total income and fairness, but add an asterisk and then write all of that in another document. Give them the other document later, at some point, not now, but before they move in, maybe on moving day, perhaps when they're approved.

Rent will be based on total income and fairness.*

One last name per household. All children must go to school and then work, and if they don't go to school and then work after school or when of age, they must leave. All adult children—Thomas, write that adult is over 18 for girls and over 21 for boys, to combat the severe inequality, Thomas, the severe inequality--who wish to continue here at The Complex must apply for their own apartment through Thomas to be approved by The Board. Preference will be given to the first-born daughters of the original applicants.

Proof required for all new marriages, new jobs, new children and dead people in the form of birth certificates, marriage certificates, death certificates, and insurance policies. No unemployed, self-employed, or entrepreneurs—

But what about us? This is for them.

No disturbing the peace. No radios, record players, boomboxes, stereos, breakdancing; nor beatboxing mouths, beat-making fists, or body slamming. No to all current and future technologies and methods including but not limited to CD players, mp3 players, rap, disco, dubstep, and trap music.

No dogs. House cats and goldfish are okay.

No spray-paint, house-paint, water-colors, or sharpie markers. No graffiti, no murals, no tagging or retouching. If the paint should chip or wear or discolor in your apartment, contact Thomas. Thomas will paint for you. Only Thomas is allowed to paint or, if this goes well, only Thomas is allowed to hire painters. But if we should struggle Thomas, you will have to remember to learn how to paint.

Do we need to say no guns? Goes without saying. So we should say it. Just to be clear.

No guns, gats, rifles, shotties, ratchets, ratties, .22s, .38s, AK-47s, pistols and magnums. No toy guns, cap guns, bb guns, water guns, nerf guns, gun-guns, nor any black wallets. Are you listening, boy?

We'll need to hire security guards or fence it in. No fences, the application will do the fencing. We'll call the security Door Men like downtown. And then we can make visitors sign-in too like downtown. Thomas, write, all visitors must sign-in like downtown and let them know, verbally when they're approved and when they arrive that each mother will be allowed one baseball bat for highly unlikely but still somewhat possible outside intruders and one leather belt for more likely and somewhat encouraged inside discipline. All discipline must occur inside. If help is needed, contact Thomas who will then refer you to The Board who will then decide if help is truly needed. No fighting within The Complex or amongst each other. If someone from the outside wishes to fight, please contact the Door Men immediately who will then contact Thomas eventually who will then contact The Board who will then show Thomas strategies for staying inside.

Thomas, before we forget boy before we finish, sign the applications and the contracts with-- Thank you for your application, Thank you for you contract, love Thomas and The Board. And then leave space for them to sign.

Thank you for your
application, Thank
you for your contract,
Love,
Thomas and The
Board

Are we done now, Are you almost ready, Thomas can we leave this boarded up barbershop now with a devised plan for new homes and new businesses. Once we leave this boarded up barbershop, our contracts and our construction will have to move faster than The New Highway's contracts and The New Highway's construction. Thomas, can you simplify this all so it can move faster than The New Highway. Did you read, and look at, and remember all of the things we gave you to read, and look at, remember so you know what we know, have remembered and seen, so we can move faster or at least just as fast as The New Highway? It'll help you simplify this all, Can you simplify?

"Thomas," said The Lawyer breaking down the boards that boarded up the door to the outside before knowing if the others, the members of The Board, were ready. "Can

you simplify this and then execute, boy?" He Asked, letting light in, blinding all, forcing them to huddle together in the one spot free from the sun, under the clock.

Thomas surrounded by pens and typewriters, floppy disks, and quil feathers, calculators, dictionaries, and a thesaurus; maps, train bus and delivery routes, personal testimonies and narratives from displaced peoples across cultures and histories, a biography of one Mr. Robert Moses and transcripts of his last three speeches; rule book on chess, checkers and scrabble, a rule book on poker, a rule book on taxes and tithes, a textbook on human anatomy, analogy, and aristocracy, The American Constitution, The Lord's Prayer, Dred vs. Scott, a first edition copy of Stan Lee's Captain America Foils the Traitors Revenge, the circulars, the winning playbook of the '73 Knicks, the '01 Lakers, Andre the Giant's personal diary, and the home videos of every basketball player ever drafted straight out of high school, The Old Testament, The New Testament, and a glass of water browned by The State, from which he drank before finally replying to the question asked of him.

"Thomas, can you simplify, Thomas, can you simplify, Thomas, can you simplify," said Thomas finally.

The Board had been severely hurt outside and before The Complex by lovers and colleagues, colleges and the military, bosses and interviewers, The Planners, their mothers and fathers, each other and secrets. The Lawyer would never make partner downtown, and The Postman when he had been The Military Man had fought for this country without a gun, resigned to the kitchen to cut and peel and cook potatoes that fed the men who shot the guns; The Dentist and The Jeweler had been forced to marry

women they didn't like or love, and Thomas never had a voice. The Complex would fix all of this.

III.

The Planners, jealous of The Board's accomplishments and The Complex's self-sufficiency, went back to planning and redrew the school districts, dividing The Complex and dissolving the sense of community. Turf wars, derived from competitive sports and differing school colors, began between the children within and outside of The Complex, so The Board contacted the politicians and the priests to see who might help. The Politicians already belonged to The Planners, but The Priests with private-schools were willing to listen.

Thomas, ask them how much for all of the children, absolutely all of the children in all of the buildings.

Thomas asked, The Board agreed, and they (Thomas, The Board and The Priests) added it to the rent, still based on overall income and fairness. A simple charge for the private schools, and a simple charge for The Board's thoughts and decisions, and one more simple charge for the shuttlebuses and dependency—still cheaper and safer than anywhere outside of The Complex, so the extra expense would keep everyone humble, practical, and happy.

IV.

People broke the rules and were evicted. Nelson Roberts, a disabled vet, bought his wife a washing machine because the neighbors were nosy, constantly asking why she was there almost every night washing the same set of sheets, sheets he had been wetting in his sleep because of his bad memories and bed legs and weak bladder. On first use, as though the plumbing and the pipes and the walls knew the rules, it malfunctioned, dislodged, and flooded the hardwood floors, soaking the ceiling of Angie Perez who had been allowing her unreported mother to sleep on her couch. The old woman, exhausted from dodging Thomas and suffering from sleep apnea, snored and drowned by drip, lying on her back as each droplet fell directly from the ceiling into both her nostrils slipping to the back of her throat and causing a sleep-death, or so how they wrote it, so The Complex would not at all be responsible for the malfunctioning tattle-tale pipes and plumbing's policing, but still, both the Roberts and the Perez families were asked to leave.

Felicia Donaldson's adult son had been running from the police after hopping a turn-style and ran the thirty minutes to The Complex in fifteen, believing the police would not come this far away from the train station because of a turn-style offense, and they didn't, but the Door Men said hey you, and he didn't stop so he was stopped, frisked, and found to still have a key eighty-seven days after his twenty-first birthday.

William Reynolds, Javier Lopez, and Tank Willis all lost their jobs when The New Highway was complete and never recovered because there was nothing else to be built after The New Highway was complete so they wandered outside of The Complex, going from tenement to tenement, thirty-day lease to one-year lease, waiting for more construction.

Douglass James, son of Martha James, and Mikey Williams, son of Hilda Williams, formed a rap group and became rap stars, but first they disturbed the peace in the parks and got their mothers evicted. The two of them there before the eviction from sun up to sun down, jumping on the jungle-gym's drawbridge practicing rhythm, movement and enunciation, using clips and lines of already established rappers they loved, remembered and recited:

Don't push me because I'm close to the edge.

Dead in the middle of Little Italy, little did we know That we riddled two middleman who didn't do diddily.

Today was a good day.

If I knew what I knew in the past I would've been blacked out on your ass.

And I pay my mama's bills, I ain't got no time to chill.

Over and over again, they jumped and rapped and rapped and jumped to the rhythm of other lyricists. Douglass, going by D-Money, and Mikey, going by M-Dollar, nicknames derived from the change that flew from their pockets as they jumped and rapped on the drawbridge, ignoring all of the Door Men's warnings, and all of Thomas's citations before The Board decided removal was best. Still, D-Money and M-Dollar turned that change into dollars and moved their mothers to Brooklyn, after just a few stints in the

tenement houses post-eviction. The rap duo would always be grateful for The Complex's acoustics and the drawbridge's bounce.

Others did okay. Brenda Chu, Lionel Lorenzo, Samantha Brown, and Glenda Fish sent sons and daughters to college, and Thomas always helped with the applications. Margaret Singh retired comfortably and alone with a rent manageable for one, comfortable and alone. And all of The Board's businesses thrived.

V.

And then the fires and crimes began outside of The Complex and one of the priests, Father Pat—with good intentions and thinking about the larger picture, those within and outside of The Complex—began failing all of the boys who were good at football so they'd quit school and use that strength to fight the fires and the crime. The mothers took the issue to The Board, but The Board was also afraid of the fires and the crime, and thought their boys who were good at football might also be good at fighting fire and crime. The mothers were taking days off of work to beg teachers, judges, and Thomas, so Thomas called The Board and The Board called Father Pat into a meeting while the mothers waited outside the room, holding drinking glasses to the door, trying to hear the conversation.

Thomas and The Board offered Father Pat a seat and together they drew up a compromise. He would continue to fail the boys who were good at football, but would always pass the boys who were good at baseball, and the boys who were good at basketball would be on a case-by-case basis.

Some of the boys withdrew and some continued, but all either became cops or robbers or baseball stars and unhappy firemen. But because of the unhappy firemen

unenthusiastically putting out the fires without haste, buildings outside of The Complex needed to be torn-down and rebuilt again so the demolition and construction teams came back, and William Reynolds, Javier Lopez, and Tank Willis, again employed, returned to The Complex.

VI.

The Dentist died from nothing but old age and a mother demanded his seat. Ms. Shirley's son Alamo had been good at football, but died fighting fires, and this made her more angry than sad because she'd gone to Thomas and The Board for help and they denied her request for a live-in tutor coach boyfriend who had promised to make her boy into a man.

Your son, Thomas told her as The Board told him to tell her, is too old and your daughter is too young to live with a man who is not their father.

Ms. Shirley called upon witnesses to support her case. Her mother, her mother's mother who was an original mother, her father, and her children's father who now lived in the South, and could only be here to turn his own boy into a man twice a year because he was denied his own apartment after their discounted divorce. He wrote a letter to Thomas on her behalf—

Dear Thomas,

Please.

Love,

Alamo Sr.

Thomas handed the letter to The Board, and The Board handed it back to him, now stamped ‘Denied’ in bright red over Alamo Sr.’s cursive ‘please.’

Alamo Jr., Ms. Shirley’s son, was chasing an arsonist through one of the burning buildings outside of The Complex. He ducked, dived, and dodged most of the flames, but a cat also fleeing fell from a ledge, landing on Alamo along with the ledge itself, a banister, and the floorboard, which sacked him to the ground. Alamo was then trampled by tenants, unaware that his body was below the only clear path out of the tenement building, and thus, when the smoke cleared and he was found burnt alive and flattened, he became a street sign, a symbol for duty and sacrifice. Alamo Way, the alley was called.

Honoring her son as he lived and not as he died, she laced up his 5th Grade cleats (the only ones she could fit), and threw on his 10th Grade football jersey (also the only one she could fit) over her nursing scrubs, and lastly, and at her daughter’s suggestion, added his Fireman’s hat because it was good work even if not the work she thought he should have been doing, and asked her daughter to take her picture in their kitchen.

“Little girl, come here and take this picture.”

Her daughter, Tanya, desperate for her mother’s attention and acknowledgement and still dressed in her uniform from Father Pat’s school, asked if she too could be in the picture, and if she too could wear Alamo’s clothes.

“Yes,” said Ms. Shirley, “To the picture. No to the clothes.”

Tanya set a timer on the camera, took a photo, and then sat at their computer desk, waiting for her mother to tell her what she wanted the flyer to say.

Ms. Shirley took a chair from their dining room table set and sat it next to her daughter at the computer, and watched as Tanya pulled a wire from a drawer that connected the camera to the computer, and swore she could see the photo slightly fatten the wire as it traveled up and into the computer before it appeared on the screen.

"Vote Ms. Shirley for The Board, Mothers for Reform, Remembering Alamo. Middle-Class Working Mothers Party, Representing the Mothers, The Mothers, The Women's Solution, Save our Children, We Need New. A vote for Shirley is a vote for you, Implement Term Limits on The Board, The Board needs The Mothers, The Board needs The Women. Help me pick two and then make two."

Vote Ms. Shirley for The Board, and The Board needs The Women, Tanya typed.

"No," said Ms. Shirley "Vote Ms. Shirley for The Board, and The Board needs The Mothers."

Tanya backspaced.

Tanya typed.

"No, no no, Vote Ms. Shirley for The Board, and The Mothers."

Tanya backspaced, typed and then printed.

"Now, can you find me a speech made by a mother or a woman about women so that I can appeal to the other mothers and women, maybe form a real The Mothers. I feel like if I can get the mothers to become The Mothers, I can secure the mother-vote and be The Board."

Tanya searched, found and printed something for Ms. Shirley to memorize and recite.

They went to each building each floor each apartment and slid their family photo flyer underneath each door. And it appealed so the mothers, hoping to become The Mothers met Ms. Shirley in the park to listen to the speech Tanya had found and Ms. Shirley had memorized:

> Women of Corinth, I have come outside to show
> You have no cause to tarnish me with blame.
> Understand: I'm all too well aware
> That many people are perceived as arrogant—
> Some privately, others in public life—and there are those
> Who gather a bad name for idleness by lying low.
> Do not suppose there's any justice rests
> In people's eyes: they hate on sight,
> Before they get to know a man's inner core,
> Although he's done no wrong to them.
> And therefore foreigners should take especial care
> To be in tune with the society they join—
> Nor would I give approval even to a native man
> Who foolishly offends his fellow citizens through selfishness.
> But in my case, this new and unforeseeable event
> Has befallen me and crushed my spirit,
> So that I've lost delight in life—I long to die, my friends
> I realize the man who was my all in all
> Has now turned out to be the lowest of the low—my husband.
> We women are the most beset by trials
> Of any species that has breath and power of thought.
> Firstly, we are obliged to buy a husband
> At excessive cost; and then accept him as
> The master of our body—that is even worse.
> And here's the throw that carries highest stakes:
> Is he a good catch or a bad?
> For changing husbands is a blot upon
> A woman's good repute: and it's not possible
> To say no to the things a husband wants.
> A bride, when she arrives to join new ways
> And customs, needs to be a prophet to predict
> The ways to deal best with her new bedmate—
> She won't have learned that back at home.
> And then…then if, when we have spent a deal of trouble
> On these things, if then our husband lives with us
> Bearing the yoke without its being forced,
> We have an enviable life.
> But if he does not: better death.
> But for a man—oh no—if ever he is irked
> With those he has at home, he goes elsewhere
> To get relief and ease his state of mind.
> He turns either to some close friend or to someone his age,
> Meanwhile we women are obliged
> To keep our eyes on just one person.
> They, men, allege that we enjoy a life
> Secure from danger safe at home,

While they confront the thrusting spears of war.
That's nonsense: I would rather join
The battle rank of shields three times
Than undergo birth-labor once.
In any case, your story's not at all the same as mine:
You have your city here, your father's house,
Delight in life, and company of friends,
While I am citiless, deserted,
Subjected to humiliation by my husband.
Manhandled from a foreign land like so much pirate loot,
Here I have no mother, brother, relative,
No one to offer me port, a refuge from catastrophe,
So I would like to ask this one small thing of you:
If I can find some means or some device
To make my husband pay the penalty to quit me
For the wrong's, stay silent, please
--also, the man who's given him his daughter, and the bride
Herself
Although a woman is so fearful in all other ways—
No good for battle or the sight of weaponry—
When she's been wrongly treated in the field of sex,
There is no other cast of mind more deadly, none.

And although the words of the speech didn't exactly apply, the sentiment was there.

VII.

Thomas, Thomas, Thomas. This is grounds, it has to be grounds, it has to be something. Did we remember to say no speeches? We said no beatboxing and body-slamming, beat-making, boomboxes and rap. Perhaps that was rap, did you hear a rhyme? She's not even using a microphone. Well, she's disturbing the peace, Thomas, isn't she disturbing the peace? They're all out there and no one looks disturbed. I'm disturbed. You're not out there. Are they going to vote? Did you listen? What did she just say? Is it our fault? We couldn't have done it. She's too young to remember when The New Highway was new and that's the problem: they don't know what we've done for them and now it's us, we're the bad guys? I wouldn't say we're the bad guys but we've made some decisions. Of course, they were great decisions. Thomas, write this down, write now. Where's your ink and feather? Write, no speeches. The Board is incomplete, I can't

write. Did we write that you couldn't write until The Board was complete? The Computer Programmer from Brooklyn wants the seat. We were going to give him the seat. I think she just won the seat. Did we ever say that our seats could be won, Thomas? Do you remember, boy? It doesn't say, but she's got the people. They ate up every word. Look, some of the husbands are on the terraces listening too. She's got it. She's got it. It's one seat. What harm could giving this one mother one seat do. Her intentions seem good. Our intentions were good. Our intentions are good. She's us now, Thomas. Go let her know, boy, that she's us now.

VIII.

The Board made amendments to the contract, now allowing adult children to leave when ready, and small dogs. Everything else remained the same.

IX.

The children were doing things in the park that The Board couldn't see from the board room on the top floor of the tallest building because all of the trees by this time had grown so strong and so large their branches left scratch marks on many of the top floor terraces. The speculation was killing them. The Post-Man and The Grocer had theories about sex and swings and impropriety that caused both a heart attack so they were replaced by The Sanitation Man and The Retail Manager. The Board ordered Thomas to order that the trees be removed. They closed the park until the job was complete and all of the trees had been removed and replaced by rose bushes.

Janice LaSalle submitted a proposal to replace the park with a community vegetable garden, but The Board denied her claim, citing the disrespect it'd be to the dead

Grocer whose daughters' daughters' daughters still lived off its profits, cooking paper billed cabbage heads for dinner almost every night.

Mahogany Nelson, two daughters from an original, missed the trees tapping at her window like they did when she was a child in The Complex so she invested in the lottery, determined to give her three boys (one almost old enough to become a cop or a robber) both trees and an inheritance. Every other Friday, on her way home from work with her paycheck crinkled in her pocketbook, she walked from the train so she could stop at the little stores outside of The Complex, buying one lotto ticket she looked over her shoulder for nosy neighbors and off-shift Door Men. After one hundred every other Fridays, she finally hit big and bought a four-door sedan from the parking lot behind the second building , and drove it onto the no longer new New Highway stopping at every exit to marvel at the trees and churches alongside it before ultimately ending up in Connecticut where she would buy a house, stay, and see both her trees and her three boys (none neither a cop nor a robber) grow from her kitchen window while drinking expensive coffee that often made her miss The Complex's discounts.

X.

There was a blackout, but The Board remembered how the water had belonged to The State that had sided with The Planners, had its own generators and wires and workings, but its plot was the only well-lit space for miles so people desperate and deserted, stopped seeing the invisible fence and wandered onto the property which was fine, the trees were gone so The Board could see that everyone inside and outside of The Complex just need the benches.

Emilio Jeffries, now a baseball star and the only son of Sandra Lopez-Jeffries, had wished for water to swim in when he grew up at The Complex, so he donated a pool, believing that those growing up in The Complex now might want water to swim in too. The Board, proud of Emilio and thinking it a good idea, gave him a seat, designed a plan to put the pool in the parking lot, asking The Car Salesman to vacate his seat and his business from the premises.

No longer a member of The Board, he spoke: "And what will people do for transportation, for cars?"

"The Board will be endorsing swimming now, exercise, biking, good things," said Thomas to Woodrow Mathers, formally known as The Car Salesman.

Grateful for his contribution and service, The Board allowed Woodrow Mathers to keep his apartment and the ones he had given to two daughters and most recently a great grandson.

The New Pool required new rules so The Board met at the top floor and made amendments.

We should allow smoke now. Still, no smoking, but maybe barbecuing is okay now. We have live-in firemen and plenty of extinguishers.

Music? Yes, but no loud music. What's loud? Loud is it can be heard from up here. Loud is if it can be heard from the train. Loud is if it disturbs and only if it disturbs. Disturbs who? The Doormen. Other people. Us. The Lifeguards.

We'll need Lifeguards. Thomas, hire from within. Who here would know how to lifeguard? The girls. Thomas, learn how to lifeguard and then teach it to the girls this

time. The girls will be The Lifeguards. Thomas, order the girls one-piece bathing suits. Get their sizes from their mothers. Ask Father Pat's School, what day works best for the girls. Tuesdays. Thomas, write, On Tuesdays girls will take lifeguard lessons. Start now. The Pool isn't ready, how can he start? You don't need a pool to learn how to lifeguard. Teach them how to make sure other people are breathing. Show them how to spot someone drowning. Show them what it looks like, and then teach them how to rescue and revive. Thomas, are you listening boy, write this down: Smoke allowed for barbecuing, music allowed until it annoys, and the girls will be lifeguards, and make you sure sign it, Thomas.

With Love and Much Thought,

Thomas and The Board.

And so Thomas, went around The Complex, cracking his back and knees to bend down and slide The Amendments under the doors of each apartment.

XI.

At the grand opening of The Pool, Tanya, wearing Alamo's old clothes, looked for Ms. Shirley. She was visiting from downtown where she lived in a studio apartment with a woman who did not share her last name, and who Ms. Shirley often called her roommate although, it was not just a room but a bed that they shared.

Tanya and Ms. Shirley walked by each other twice, neither recognizing the other. Tanya, unable to distinguish her mother from the other members of The Board and Ms. Shirley, so confused about how much time had passed while she was in the board room, looked for a younger girl, one still in a uniform from Father Pat's School.

They texted:

Where are you?

I'm here

Do you see me, by Thomas.

I see Thomas, I don't see you.

I'll call.

Ms. Shirley called and Tanya answered but there were no quiet spots.

"Hello," they both screamed into the phone.

"Hello," Tanya repeated, folding down her opposite ear to drown out the noise of children and families and news reporters and music and the choir from Father Pat's School, and the celebratory police and fire sirens, and the hired skywriters overhead, and The Doormen yelling at the people to stay off the grass, and the small dogs barking, and the people.

"Hello," Ms. Shirley screamed from deep inside the cluster of bodies that was The Board, and they, not looking at Ms. Shirley, unaware that this conversation was personal began to pass the hello between them and into Thomas, still tall and pretty and built for show, concealer and blush hiding the wrinkled wires spreading down his neck and his hair made fuller by all black spray paint he had confiscated from the children over the years.

“Hello,” Thomas said in his loud public speaking voice, which slowly began to quiet the crowd.

“Can you hear me?” Ms. Shirley asked Tanya, which The Board repeated and whispered to Thomas who then asked it to the crowd, causing a silence that forced Tanya, polite and not wanting to disturb, to whisper her response to Ms. Shirley.

“Mom, I’m leaving,” she said, even her quiet voice getting the attention of The Door Men, The Mothers, and The Lifeguards.

“Don’t move.”

“Don’t move,” shouted Thomas, and so the crowd stood absolutely still, making Tanya’s exit difficult. She, moving in the opposite direction, roughly pushing past still and stoic bodies, was obvious and obtrusive.

“I see you. Come this way, closer.”

“I see you. Come this way, closer,” Thomas said with a smile that revealed a mouth full of veneers, teeth too big for his face, motioning with his hands for the crowd to move in, inadvertently increasing the difficulty of Tanya’s escape.

“This is too frustrating,” said Tanya, still trying to whisper into the phone.

“I want to show you the work that’s been done, the changes made.”

“I want to show you the work that’s been done, the changes made.” Thomas extended his left arm to the audience and then above and over him.

“Do you see The Lifeguards?”

“Do you see The Lifeguards?” Asked Thomas, pointing to one, Rachel Batista daughter of Richard and Lisa Batista who was three daughters down from an original mother.

“Would you like to be a Life Guard? I can make you a Lifeguard.”

“Would you like to be a Life Guard? I can make you a Lifeguard. I have the power,” Thomas pointed to a little girl and added a line and a giggle, causing the crowd to let laughter escape from their bodies. And Thomas smiled wider and laughed louder, proud of the line he had added, and that his, and not The Board’s words had made the crowd laugh.

“I love you,” Ms. Shirley said, but Tanya nor The Board, and therefore Thomas could hear this over the crowd’s laughter that was onlt now beginning to cease.

“I’m going home, Mom. I’m going Downtown.”

“What does Downtown have that we don’t?”

“What does Downtown have that we don’t?” Almost falling, Thomas’s own excitement caused him to grip the podium that hid his platform shoes.

And the crowd cheered in response.

“This is home.”

“This is home.”

“What do you do now?”

“You ma’am,” Thomas said, now more comfortable adding things, “What do you do now?

“Me?” Asked the woman, “I’m a pharmacist.”

“Did you say you were a pharmacist? Oh honey, that’s wonderful,” Ms. Shirley said to Tanya.

“Did you say you were a pharmacist? Oh honey, that’s wonderful,” repeated Thomas, winking, and causing his false eyelash to stray on the stage too high-up and too far from the people for any person in the crowd to notice or care.

Tanya, turned around by the renovations and trapped by the people stood still, overwhelmed and exhausted by her journey to the sidewalk, The Complex’s end. “Congratulations, Mom, I’m happy for The Board and The Complex.” Tanya dug the toe of Alamo’s old 5th grade cleat into the ground. “Alamo would be proud too,” she said looking around. There were rose bushes and bikes, daisies and fire extinguishers everywhere. There was a koi fish pond where the park had been and not even a chalked hop-scotch board scarring any of the cement pathways. The grass was even and the people were well fed, but still, the lack of trees made Tanya feel ill and nostalgic for uglier times.

“Do you have one more minute, for me to tell you about the new plan, the sister-complex across the way, on the other side of The Highway?”

“Do you have one more minute, for me to tell you about the new plan, the sister-complex across the way, on the other side of The Highway?” Asked Thomas.

And the crowd cheered.

Thomas pulled back a red cloth hiding a large painting that the crowd could see and a 3D diagram, only truly visible to the people on the stage—The Board, The Priests, The local Politicians, The Planners, The News Teams, The Investors, The Bankers, and The Bronx-Borough President.

The Sister-Complex would be called The Sister-Complex and it would begin with everything The Complex had to accumulate through time, hard work, and sacrifice: a

community garden, a pool, a gym, a grocery store that charged for the convenience instead of discounted for the disparities, and a dry-cleaners; a bike share program and a nurse; bars and restaurants and offsite valet parking, Door Men and Life Guards, a private school now run by Sister Anne, and all income-reporting rules would be suspended here at The Sister-Complex. Anyone who could afford it was allowed to apply.

"You should apply to the The Sister-Complex," said Ms. Shirley. "Pharmacists won't need roommates, unlike downtown."

"You should apply to The Sister-Complex, pharmacists won't need roommates unlike downtown" repeated Thomas pointing to the people wearing guest passes—the camera men and news reporters, the famous friends of Emilio Jefferies, the baseball star; the wealthy mothers of the award winning Rap duo, originally evicted because of outdated and ugly rules; The construction company owners who signed the contracts that sent their men to build both The Pool and The Sister-Complex, and the alumni from Father Pat's school who were now pharmacists and big time robbers. "You all should apply to The Sister-Complex," Thomas repeated, careful not to point to the Doormen, or cops, or unhappy firemen on duty that day to make sure the event went smoothly.

Needing a direct answer to an important question, Tanya hung up the phone and texted Ms. Shirley immediately:

Where is this going exactly?

Where the tenements used to be.

Where the tenements are?

Where the tenements will have used to been once they're no longer there, yes.

Tanya stared at her mother's words, and then stared at the scene: The people on top of the stage shaking hands in pale suits, the freshly formed line of people below the stage waiting for an applications, the children of The Complex swimming in the pool, laughing without worry or second-thought, and her mother, Ms. Shirley, on stage, amongst/in/a part of The board, staring at her phone, waiting for Tanya to text back. But Tanya hadn't so Ms. Shirley texted again:

The demolition and construction teams will be back. This is good.

Tanya looked from her mother's last message--proud, hopeful, convinced-- to her mother's body there on the stage, drowning in a pants suit, hunched over and without smile. Her message and her body telling different stories, neither more true than the other so Tanya, unable to pinpoint a truth, left the matter alone.

"And just remember folks," Thomas spoke into the mic completely of his own volition, "I'm Thomas, this is The Board, and we love you."

Fire Man

They wanted it to look like accidents, so I stole my mother's votive candles, put them on dusty-dressers, kitchen counters, and window sills— realistic places for votive candles, said the prayer on its back, and lit. And then, I did the same to the ones I placed on kitchen counters, and window sills, and once every candle was lit, and every prayer was said, I let them burn for a few minutes, just while I finished a cigarette. I laid down in all that debris, in that bed that hadn't been slept in for years, maybe even a decade or so, and dropped my almost finished cigarette onto the floor, complete accident. Just a person stressed out and praying, fell asleep, completely reasonable. And then I walked over to the window sills, knocked out some glass with an elbow, lit another, smoked a little more, and dropped that too. A badass kid threw a rock, knocked over St. Michael and the squatter inside was so startled, his cigarette flew in the air, fell onto the car-seat acting as couch and with all that exposed cotton, a fire was inevitable. And then I did the kitchen counter last, turned on all pilots and the radio atop the refrigerator, danced with it, let my lack of rhythm and two left feet and offensive lineman hip bump into the candle while my last smoke of the hour dwindled down to just a butt, and then again, I flicked. They kept the heat and electricity on for me, just to do this, paying their monthly bills in hopes that their anti-santa would come in the middle of night, feet fast than reindeer, a bag full of matches and cartoons of cigarettes and liquids— bleach, gas if it were under two dollars a gallon, cooking oil, and a gallon of water. Had to keep changing it up. They gave me a bigger cut if nobody could question the cause, if there was no investigation, if there were no skeptical adjusters, if I could make them believe in St. Michael and cigarettes.

They must've been talking because I had a new request everyday, owners of these tenements no longer wanted to fix plumbing and collect dollar rents. Burn it, boy and burn it quick, all the tall dark figures I met in alleyways would say, and so I did. Burn it faster boy, so I did, traded my mother's candles for hair dryers and hot combs. Faster than that boy, and so I did, kerosene in the lobby. Explosions. It was sloppy. If it were me, if I were the Fire Marshall, I'd see the signs of foul play and foolish decision—I mean, where was the music?

Which is why something went wrong of course, something always goes wrong when there's no music, no staging, no lit cigarettes and plausible explanations. There was a straggler, a homeless man that slept in the basement, and with the new way, without the cigarettes, and the sounds of glass shattering and warning smells from ovens, this straggler, Jerome Monty Coles, fifty-eight years olds, veteran, son, lunatic—as we called him as kids, when we'd sneak over to this side of the highway to throw rocks in these windows, or paint these bricks with our names, and he'd come out speaking in gibberish, talking in war language, mayday mayday he'd say, and then, we'd yell, Go back to war old man, clearly you miss it. I'm sorry. The man didn't have any family, anybody to claim his body, anyone that cared at all. But I cared. I began imagining his life. He probably had been laid off from a good job a long time ago, maybe he had one, maybe two little sisters. He probably played football at Father Pat's and wanted to be a fireman too but failed a few written exams once or twice too. My next try, I'd pass— for Mr. Coles, mayday mayday, I'm sorry. I went to confession and after I said it all, and Father Pat pretended I was a stranger, like he didn't know my voice and my options, like he hadn't patted my back after every scored touchdown, after every good catch. I put my

fingers through the tiny boxes that acted as wall and window, and I told him to look me in the eye.

"Please," I pleaded, "I need a real job."

Picnic

Rich had gone and died so we were driving down to Florida to see if they had buried him right, in the pink tie he stole from Henry's dad when we were all still in high school and he had said, God, I want to be buried in this, and also to see if his mother was okay. Rich had died in June but it took a couple of weeks to figure out why so the funeral was in the second week of July and we were all really uncomfortable because Twin's truck had leather seats and manual windows. The radio had gone out in Maryland so we were quiet and in our own heads, wondering why Florida and why Rich and why Twin's shit-show of a car had leather seats. There were four of us again, one down of course, and I thought about how Rich wouldn't have fit if this reunion had been for any other reason anyway.

"I spy?" asked Marvin.

"Trees and grass and telephone poles and flatbeds and traffic signs. There, I win," said Twin. He was taking Rich's death the hardest or at least it seemed that way because he had always been the meanest and Rich—the nicest, so our balance was off. Twin was also the only one of us with a license so he had to do this all by himself.

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing," I began— to lighten the mood, "arsonists."

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists and Bananas."

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists, Bananas, and Carol's daughter, Jane."

"Yikes," said Henry, "I was going to let 'arsonists' slide, but you can't bring Carol's daughter, Jane."

The point of the game was to trip up the person after you and the person after that but you had to be careful because eventually it'd come back to you. You also had to bring things that you'd actually bring to a picnic, or so Henry says, and he had always been really big on rules and fairness so we knew this was coming. He was the only one of us who ever called "double-dribble" or "foul" during pickup games, and he never let you put down more than one card at a time in crazy eights, and he even split a pizza pie so evenly one time that he threw away the remaining slice after it had been divided between the five of us. This was when there were five of us, of course.

"You're out," said Twin.

"How?"

"Because you didn't just go with it."

Henry was also the most far removed. We had all fallen off and apart and lonely but none of us like him. He and Rich dated for a while and when they broke up, we chose Rich. We didn't really, but at the time Rich was around and Henry was away.

"Fine, I'm out."

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists, Bananas, Carol's Daughter named Jane, and Daughter*s*." I put an emphasis on the "S" to make my claim that it wasn't a cheap replica of the last answer and was still within the game rules. Henry was sitting next to me in the backseat, mad about everything but the Bananas.

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists, Bananas, Carol's Daughter named Jane, Daughters, and Evangelical Priests."

"A,B,C,D,E," I heard Twin whisper, "F. I'm bringing. I mean, I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists, Bananas, Carol's Daughter named Jane, Daughters," he paused, "Evangelical Priests, and Flying Fish."

We passed a farm and I saw a cow for the first time in my life. I think we were in South Carolina or Virginia or any other state in between New York and Florida, and I hadn't realized that I'd never seen a cow before this moment, and that on a trip like this I could experience firsts. We had lost a lot of friends before, but we never had to go very far to bury them. Michael from Lafayette was in St. Raymond's, and Junie was sitting on his grandmother's mantel, and Chelsea's ashes had been thrown out, or spread, at the end of City Island by *Johnny's Restaurant* where the owners had chased us off, scolding us for feeding the seagulls.

"I'm going on a picnic and I'm bringing Arsonists, Bananas, Carol's Daughter named Jane, Daughters, Evangelical Priests, Flying Fish, Gum, Horseradish, Igloos, and Jam Master Jay."

"Don't bring the dead into this," said Twin.

"Am I out?"

"Is Henry asleep?"

"Yeah."

"Just go again and don't bring the dead into this."

Twin had already punched Marvin hard and in the mouth for crying when we got on the Cross Bronx Expressway. This was only fifteen minutes into the trip but the hit was still fresh on everybody's mind because Marvin's bottom lip was a little fat and his eyes still red. Twin was taking this the hardest and nobody was going to out-sad him by

crying, or by bringing the dead into this, and whereas Henry might have enforced the rules, Twin always made the rules and he was so big and so angry and so street-smart and sometimes even regular smart that we didn't bother questioning things.

"Juice," I said, deciding to be simple.

"…King Kong."

"…Lobsters."

"…Myrtle Beach."

It was Marvin's turn but he was stuck, couldn't remember what the word for H was and because he was in the passenger seat, he couldn't look back at me for help without Twin noticing and he had already been punched for crying so I'm not sure what Twin would have done for cheating but I really wanted to help him because I hated anything that was just Twin and me, and even though Henry and Marvin would still be in the car, they'd be silent and it'd just be our voices dueling, and I had had a growth spurt recently so I was the tallest and Twin had already looked me up and down and commented on it before we got in the car, and I could tell he was jealous that I was still growing and even though he was still the biggest because he got a warehouse job straight out of high school and lifted so many boxes day-to-day, I was taking classes part-time at the community college, and he had already been calling me College, even though Henry was really College because he went away and if I were anybody, I was Classes not College, but we always knew Henry would go to college. I was the surprise. But if I let him win, he'd know, and if I lost, he'd gloat and if he gloated I'd miss Rich because Rich was the only one who could tell Twin when he was being an ass, and I'd cry if I thought too long about Rich, and then he'd stop the car, pull me out from the seat directly behind

his and punch me in the face too, but unlike Marvin who was competition for no one ever, I'd fight, but I'd lose because neither my classes nor my growth spurt would help in a fight against Twin so I tried to send it to Marvin telepathically. Horseradish, horseradish, horseradish, I kept saying inside my mouth without using my voice, without moving my lips.

"I don't know," he said.

"Just me and you, College."

Tired from my lack of telepathic success and not wanting to take it, to keel over and accept Twin's nickname, his dubbing, I spoke up, " Don't do that. Don't call me that—My name is Alamo." And with Henry asleep, and Marvin red and down with embarrassment, this was safe to do. There was no audience for Twin to be Twin, so we were both saved from the pull out, from the beating, bruising, and fighting, from the trying and failing.

Twin took N and we continued the game.

"…Nerve gas."

"…Oakland, California."

"…Pussy," said Twin and then he laughed so I laughed, Marvin laughed, and I woke Henry up so he could laugh too. But then Twin stopped so I stopped, Marvin stopped and Henry stopped, put the side of his head against the window, but kept his eyes outstretched and open, probably afraid to close them, afraid they might leak a little and Twin would see him in his rearview.

And then we stopped at a hotel. Our only change of clothes were our black suits because Twin didn't tell us we'd be stopping to sleep so we stripped down to our

underwear but left on our socks because at some point, and I can't remember when it happened but we all became really ashamed of our feet. It wasn't a domino effect like everything else in our lives where something happened to one of us, and then the other, and then the other, it was all of us at the same time. We stopped walking barefoot in front of each other and made sure we had close-toed slippers on when we answered our apartment doors. Also, when we were all learning to fuck, Twin told us that the rule was, you were only supposed to take your socks off if you loved the person you were fucking. He actually said *her*. You were only supposed to take your socks off if you loved her, but I'm editing just a bit so the rule still applies to us all.

We went to sleep two to a bed, but in the morning Marvin was on the floor with no pillow or sheet like he fell off in the middle of the night and Twin--splayed out against the hotel-white sheets like a chalk outline on cement--looked as though he pushed him. We went to the hotel's continental breakfast in the morning where Marvin put a couple of mini bagels in his pocket because he was the only one of us who wasn't working yet, and Henry went to a diner nearby and bought an omelet for himself and two omelets for Twin because he was driving and because as Henry said, for the sake of us all, he should have something more in his stomach than bran muffins and orange juice.

"You're back in," said Twin, steering with one hand and eating the omelet with the other as though it were a sandwich, cheese and loose egg dripping on his shorts.

"Let's start over."

"You want back in or not?"

"I'm going on a picnic," Henry began with a big breath, "And I'm bringing Arsonists, Blueberries, Carol's Daughter named June, Dingoes, Evangelist Angels,

Flying Fish, Gum, Horses, Ice, Juice, Koalas, Lobsters, Myrtle Beach, Nerves, Oakland, California, Pussy, Quotes," he stopped to think for a second, "and Roller-Skates."

This was wrong but nobody seemed to remember but me and I wasn't going to call Henry out again or maybe we all remembered and nobody cared. Henry and Rich had been the closest. I guess because they had been together like that and they didn't care that Twin had wanted to punch them both in the face at first, especially because we found out by walking in on them, and what made it worse, what really pissed Twin off was that neither of them were wearing socks. They broke up because Rich had started working the Westside Pier, grass stains on the knees of all of his pants, and Henry had gone to college, and although it had only been a year since both those things happened, it felt like much longer so maybe we'd all forgotten that Henry could be hurting the most but also, maybe now we remembered so we didn't call him out for Blueberries, Dingoes, Ice, June, and Koalas.

"…Saltwater."

"…Turtlenecks."

"…Unicycles."

"…Vick's Vapo Rub."

"…Washcloths."

And then we got pulled over. It was quick and nothing serious happened but Twin had to hand a state trooper his license and instead of calling him Twin, the officer who looked really unreal because his uniform blended in with the side of the road: dirt brown, tan, green, black, dark brown, and black again, and it seemed as though he had no eyes behind his dark aviator glasses, said, Be safe and slow down, Rickey. And I think at that

point we had forgotten Twin's name was Rickey. And I think at that point we had forgotten Twin had been Rich's twin because their selves were so different and their faces so much their own that their mother had to give them almost identical names so she'd remember herself. And I think, after the officer drove off, we sat there too long and listened to Rickey cry. And Marvin. And Henry. And then me too. But then Twin stopped so Marvin stopped, and Henry, and me too.

Dedicated Detective Responds to a Call on the Other Side of the Highway

I walked all the way to the top floor so I could work my way down, stopping at each apartment to see if anybody had seen anything, or rather, if anybody would tell me what they did see, because they all had to at least hear it, had to have been startled by the bang enough to slip on their slippers and turn on their lights and come out to their terraces and see what would have been a woman about to die, a woman down after a shot to the knee, and then two shots to the chest, and then one last one right in the middle of her scalp. They must have heard her scream for help because we got over fifty calls at exactly 1:03 am—fifty calls said the dispatcher to the captain and the captain to the uniforms and the uniforms to me at 7:20 am and me to my wife at 7:33 am and my wife to my daughter at 7:55am and my daughter to her teacher and classmates at 8:32 am when I was supposed to be there to talk about cop stuff—fifty calls.

There's only forty-eight apartments in here, eight floors and six units on each and everyone has a terrace and everyone has two windows that face this corridor and there were fifty calls so somebody even called twice, and nobody wants to talk to me. I don't blame them. The uniforms are walking around with German-Shepherds and the German-Shepherds are smelling out people's stashes—cocaine, marijuana, whatever, whatever. I tell them we're here for the victim and we're here for the witnesses, but the German-Shepherds and the uniforms get bored easily. I don't blame them, being in blue is boring and petty so you get restless not being allowed to do the interesting stuff, the stuff they saw on tv that inspired their career choice: the interrogating and dealing, blackmailing and lying, the shooting. This is the speech I had prepared for my daughter's third-grade

class. This is the cop stuff. They would've loved it and the teacher might've even slept with me after because she would have loved it too, and my wife probably wouldn't even mind because that's how good the presentation would have been. She would've said, Wow, honey, you deserve our daughter's third-grade teacher, and I would have said, Thank you baby, and I would have given her and my daughter one of the bored German-Shepherds as a thank you, but secretly my wife would probably prefer one of the bored uniforms, and honestly, it'd help my job here and my job at home to occupy all of the bored.

1201 talks to me through the door, and he says he didn't see anything or hear anything and he says it in Spanish and even though, I speak a little Italian which helps but not much because I still did fail Spanish all through out high school, I don't bother pressuring him to tell me anything. There's forty-seven more callers.

At the next four or five doors, I make the mistake of knocking like a uniform, loud impatient pounds and some people answer and everybody looks scared and nobody invites me in for coffee or offers me a glass of water and I could really use some hospitality right now, or at least some coffee so at the next door, I ring the doorbell and don't knock, and that makes a world of difference. The lady is short, Black, and unafraid but non-accepting of me or the two uniforms behind me.

Yes, she says, in a way that's both admiring and annoying, Can I help you?

Hi Ma'am—and then she cuts me off just like that and says, Do I look like a Ma'am to you, so I'm trying to remember if Ma'am has become a racist word recently. I've got a boy in college and he comes home for Thanksgiving just to tell me which words are racist now, and why Thanksgiving is racist too and how if he weren't afraid for

his sister, he wouldn't even come home at all, but he's got to make sure she becomes like him and not like us, and I'm fine with that. Truly, I do not give a single shit. We raised him and according to him, he's not racist so it probably doesn't work like that, but who am I to tell him that when I failed Spanish all throughout High School and he's off at college, getting live updates on what's racist.

How would you like me to address you? I say to 1105

Mary-Beth, she says, But actually Ms. Chanel is fine.

Are you a school teacher, I ask because she looks and sounds like a school teacher, like she's from somewhere else, deep south or midwest maybe and like her parents had money and maybe even one of them is white and racist so she's got ideas about paying it forward and bettering underprivileged communities before she heads back down south to get married, like a peace-core trip .

Why yes, she says, How did you know?

I'm good at my job, I tell her. She looks like the person that called twice.

We're here about the crime that occurred between last night and this morning and I was wondering if you could tell us anything you might have heard or saw, or anything about the victim, a Ms. Michelle Garcia, she lived on six. Did you happen to know her?

She has young children, Ms. Chanel says to me and I can tell Ms. Chanel didn't know it was this Ms. Garcia before this moment.

And a husband?

Ex.

Angry?

Sometimes.

Fights?

Sometimes.

Physical or Verbal?

Rumors, you know.

I know. Name?

Don't know. She moved here single.

And you?

What?

Do you have a husband or somebody else that lives here?

What does that have to do with anything?

Ma'am. I mean Ms. Chanel, I was just wondering if there's anybody else I could speak to who might have known or heard or saw something else.

I'm the only one in here who'll speak to you, Ms. Chanel says, and she shifts her weight and straightens her skirt, and switches her focus to the German-Shepherds. I should tell her cop-stuff since I won't make it to my daughter's school today to tell her teacher. This could do.

Can I leave you my card?

There is one more thing, she says and she won't look at me and she's still shifting and switching, staring at the Shepherds.

Give me a minute, okay? I say this while looking at her but really I'm talking to the dogs and the uniforms. Can you two go down to the cars and get me a notebook?

Both of us?

God, I think to myself, they're so damn dumb.

Yes, both of you, I say aloud. And actually while you're down there, take some pictures for me.

But we already took pictures.

And now I'm starting to get mad because these guys can't take a hint, won't understand that nobody wants to talk to them and nobody will talk to me with them behind me looking like prison guards, antsy and ready to attack at one false move, and also can't they see that I'm flirting here and that I'd like to cheat on my wife in private if it's at all possible. I don't need them looking at her at the next Christmas party, hiding secrets behind their eyes and feeling sorry for her like she's some type of victim, and she being as perceptive as she is, feeling an embarrassment that could quickly turn to a vengeance that might make her take one of these fools to a bathroom on a vacant floor of the station house and blow one or maybe even both of them at this same fucking Christmas Party.

Get out of here, I say to them, and I raise my voice so they know I'm serious. But also to impress Ms. Chanel. They're always so impressed when us suits yell at the boys in blue. They tend to talk after that.

Can I come in?

The ex is a cop, Ms. Chamberlin says as soon as I'm on the other side of the door. I thought this was about sex or at least coffee, but she really did have more to tell me about the case.

Like me or like them? And I use my thumb to point behind me as though they're still behind me.

What's the difference between you and them?

I'm insulted, but again, I was supposed to explain cop stuff today anyway.

Well, for one, I say to her, they wear a uniform and I don't. I ask the questions and they don't. They care about the petty and I don't. I say this one while looking at an ashtray on her coffee table, where she's got a tiny little brown cigarette which I'm sure isn't a cigarette at all. I'm allowed to have secrets and they're not. I say this one eyeing her down and I linger in certain places, hoping she gets what I'm trying to do here.

So if you could just tell me whether or not he's a uniform, I could probably wrap up this case by the end of the day.

You think it was the husband?

It's always the husband. Sometimes the boyfriend. One time it was a dyke-lover to a woman with a husband, and then the husband killed the dyke-lover too, right in the middle of my investigation. I couldn't believe that shit. The dyke-lover claimed it was an accident, and she got scared so she tried to cover it up, but they had been arguing about when and how the original dead woman should leave the husband, but she had a kid, you know? And sometimes kids make you stay longer than you should and the dyke-lover didn't have any kids on account of her being a dyke or whatever so she didn't really understand this—although my son tells me the gays can have kids now, and I'm backwards in my thoughts and assumptions but you know whatever, whatever—so they're yelling at each other while ones in the shower and the other is brushing her teeth, and boom boom boom yell, push slap fall, head hits the tub, splits open and bleeds to death. The dyke-lover is scared because the husband is about to come home from work so she runs away and leaves her there like that, calls 911 from the woman's cellphone, but

doesn't say anything. I blame the television shows because she probably thought the dispatcher was going to be a TV dispatcher and not view it as a prank call or whatever, and send the cops and the ambulances and the fire departments and all that hoopla. But you know, Ms. Chanel, the television cops don't have budgets. Sometimes when I'm watching that shit and they've got eighty guys trying to find like a runaway or a teenager because a detective had an emotional connection with them at a foster-home once, I'm all like —Who the fuck is paying for that? You know, you're a teacher, right? You know about budgets.

I do, she says, and I can tell I've probably made her uncomfortable with this rant and probably the word 'dyke' and I do have to get to the other apartments so I'm about to ask if she knows what this cop-ex looks like, what color his eyes are so I can find him, pluck one out, and turn them in for observation; but then, Ms. Chanel asks about that other case. She says, did the judge understand the husband's anger?

Well, first of all, you're jumping ahead. Patience, Ms. Chanel, patience. She lets out a little laugh at this and so now I really have to tell the story because I want to hear that little laugh again. I want to make her laugh so hard she sits down so I can sit down too because these shoes hurt and I'm tired and if we were sitting, I could probably flirt better. I could like graze her elbow or something, or the tips of our shoes could touch and she could jump back from the shock and accidentally swipe my thigh with her thigh and once our thighs touched we'd practically be having sex so we'd might as well just go on and actually have sex, but really it all would depend on how I tell her this story.

So I said to the guy, the husband, once we figured it all out, buddy, don't do anything stupid and what does he do? Something stupid. So now that woman is dead, the

dyke-lover who should have been in a cell for at least five years, at least fifteen—I could have gotten enough evidence to prove negligence and the DA would have had to ask the judge for at least fifteen—is dead, and the husband is doing twenty-five to life. So no, the answer to your question is no. The judge might have understood the husband if he just shot her or stabbed her or anything that could be explained by a quick passionfruit and anger cocktail. Instead, they called it a hate-crime and it was in fact a hate-crime. You should have seen that woman. He really did a number on her. It didn't seem like he was avenging the death of his wife, but like, he was re-killing his wife through her dyke-lover. I don't know if you've got a soft-stomach, Ms. Chanel, but when we found this woman, the dyke-lover, she—and Ms. Chamberlin cuts me off again.

I can imagine.

Soft-stomach?

Desensitized, she says and then she asks a question, Would you like a bottle of water on your way out? She goes to her kitchen to get me a bottle of water before I can say that I'd much prefer a cup of coffee, in a mug.

While I wait, I take out my phone and text the word 'desensitized' to my boy in school. I type, 'What's this word mean in real-life, Junior?' He hates when I call him Junior but what am I supposed to call him, Anthony? That's my fucking name. I was working as a uniform and both my eyes were under examination because my partner at the time, shot a civilian and I didn't know it was coming so I had no time to look away or close my eyes or stop him so I became a witness and as a witness, I couldn't get to the hospital when my wife delivered. I was sitting in the station, with a bandana tied around my face, on the station-phone, blind and antsy listening to my wife and her mother and

my mother and my sisters and her sister and my uncle Joe saying over and over again, Little Anthony this and Little Anthony so I start yelling. I'm not there and I can't see anything and nobody is listening to my voice through the phone so I'm yelling loudly and with a lot of anger in the back of my throat, and the station has a protocol because sometimes the eye-exams really freak uniforms out so they sedate us when we start yelling. I'm trying to explain that I was fine with being blind, it was the Little Anthony I had a problem with, but the station-nurses already had a shot in my neck, and quite obviously I didn't see it coming. I would have named him something more fucked up so he'd really have something to complain about like Helicopter or Dictionary. Something funny. My wife has no sense of humor, no creativity. Our daughter's name might have been Anthony too if I hadn't already been promoted by the time she was born, and was there to name her Badge. Anybody seen my Badge? That was how I was going to open my presentation to her class today.

Ms. Chanel comes back with an impersonal plastic bottle of water and I can't tell if she liked my retelling of that case, and I don't know if I upset her because Junior hasn't texted me back to tell me what desensitized means in real life. I mean I can kind of guess, break it down, but she said it like there's the word and then there's the word so although I could just look it up in the dictionary on my phone too, I'd still need Junior to tell me what it means to people.

Detective, Ms. Chanel says, He's a cop like you.

Like me? Are you sure?

She nods, and I think now about how hard this case just got, and how much sex I won't be having. When you get your real eyes back, you get really good at lying and

secrets, or rather, you just lie and keep secrets because you can for the first time since you were a uniform. I was in blue and living without my own eyes for eleven years and the first thing I did when I got promoted, when I got my eyes back, was rob a small deli in my old almost full-blue uniform, almost because I hadn't received my badge yet, the detective one. I stole three sodas and thirty bucks and held the cashier at gun point in a ski-mask with the eyes cut-out. He gave the surveillance tape to the captain and I'm sure the captain might have known it was me, he just didn't care, or maybe he had a similar story, and wasn't going to punish me for how I chose to be reborn. It cost the department a lot to check all those eyes, and a lot of newer younger uniforms had to be sedated, but at least, because of me, they all had to do it together. I fostered community, created brotherhood, had a good time.

Ms. Chanel closes the door and I close the case.

Well-Meaning

The children were playing in the park when Mary-Beth Chanel (née Turner) arrived with two very tall white men with cameras for heads; meaning, cameras so fixed to their shoulders, so nestled into their necks, so bound to their left ears, that if there were faces behind all of that equipment, the children couldn't see a single feature so thus, to them, the camera acted as replacement, a lens for an eye, speaker as ear, and so on save for the large hands, long fingers with bitten to the nub fingernails, pale-pink and choppy that held all that face together. And because Mary-Beth would do all of the talking, ask all of the questions, the Camera-Men were also so absolutely quiet, a silence that made them seem inanimate and subordinate, moving their heads to the point and direction of Mary-Beth's own bitten to the blood fingernails, red-brown and just as choppy. Shoot that, she said to them with each point of a finger. Shoot that, she said with a nudge of a chin. Are you shooting, she'd ask with a whisper in the middle of someone else's conversation.

A July Tuesday at two in the afternoon.

Eight interconnected pathways leading from the double-locked front doors of four buildings facing inward importing into the aforementioned park, exporting onto sidewalks, the public space that boarded this inward facing private-community, all loosely mirroring the board game *Trouble.* Each building catty-cornered and labeled by number instead of color slightly unlike the board-game *Trouble* but again, like the board game *Trouble*, this park sat in its middle and very much so resembled the stationary domed-in die, pop-able but caved.

This setting, this community, this *Trouble* like structure known as The Complex was the research subject of Mary Beth Chanel, a social-worker turned sociologist and documentarian interested in the people of The Complex for both professional and personal reasons.

The Professional: The Complex was historically and culturally known to be the radical response to the invention of a highway that disrupted and destroyed neighborhoods and communities, and Mary-Beth Chanel had coined a term for the violence of this creation, borrowing from the concept of gentrification coined by Ruth Glass, she called Robert Moses' highway an act of 'Infrastructural Aggradation.' To her, and those pleased with her work, including these two Camera-men, 'Infrastructural Aggradation' meant guising the creation of material structures as progressive in order to dispose of undesirable human beings; by undesirable human beings, Mary-Beth Chanel meant the human beings that were deemed undesirable through social stratification; meaning, oppressed peoples; meaning, her mother.

The Personal: Mary-Beth's mother's mother's had been an oppressed person displaced by this act of Infrastructural Aggradation, and her mother was so undesirable, even the radical response known as The Complex denied her application for safety and replacement. And so because of this, Mary-Beth had made it her life's mission or hypothesis to prove The Complex's mission, which according to Mary-Beth, was to

radically respond to Infrastructural Aggradation with respectability politics; meaning, ‘some of us are not undesirable’— cruel to a few but overall extremely effective.

The Even-More Personal: Mary-Beth had spent her younger years unhappy and isolated in a cramped apartment with a mother she herself deemed undesirable— a working-woman, a prostitute, a hoe as the children would say— and so Mary-Beth vowed to never be like her, an undesirable working-woman, so she used that time alone to focus, and eventually and without the need of the safety and comfort of The Complex, she went away to school, married, became a social worker, watched, recorded, and supervised the lives and actions of smart children (like herself) born to undesirable prostitutes (like her mother), and decided the world needed to know about what was done, and its longterm effects so she decided to go back to school, change her profession from -work to -ology, and create a documentary that would show what Mary Beth called ‘The Truth.’ Mary-Beth chose to move back into the tenement she once lived in, only now, she owned it. She bought what she called “her prison” with wealth acquired through work and marriage and truly believed in what she believed was the Complex’s mission. And with this power, she collected data: images, stories, personal accounts from her old neighbors now tenants, older and former undesirable peoples; textbooks, autobiographies, and marxist criticism. She was well on her way to proving, if not for that highway, and if not for her undesirable mother, her life would not have been so lonely and hard.

As a documentarian, she needed men and equipment and interest. As a sociologist, she needed a hypothesis and to abide by a certain set of ethics: to maintain objectivity,

respect subject's right to privacy, respect subject's from personal harm, preserve confidentiality; but as a hybrid, she hybridized.

Mary-Beth tried the adults first, but most if not all worked during what were also Mary-Beth's working hours so very few were home when she came a-knocking, and the ones that were home, the elderly and the disabled, skeptical and cautious, only opened up a crack, chain-linked locks kept the men with lenses for eyes from getting good shots, documentary shots, and although they answered Mary Beth Chanel's sociologist-questions, without the documentary shots, their contributions were useless. She had tried to assure them with her shared-identity, with her ethics, with her forms and promises, but forms and promises mean, as one elderly-disabled resident said, "Crack shit." Perhaps, there was something in their apartment that broke one of The Complex's many rules, or perhaps her questions felt too much like the interview process for admission and caused them to wonder whether or not they were being reinterviewed for possible eviction, or perhaps, they just didn't want to— either way, Mary-Beth had no luck getting both good shots and ethical information so she again, hybridized:

The children. The park technically was public space. She had permission from The Complex's manager, Thomas, to be on the property but of course was told that she would need permission to enter the resident's private spaces, but the park, the centered pop-able die that it was could be touched by all and anyone playing, much like the board game *Trouble.*

The Children Outside on a July Tuesday at Two in the Afternoon

From building one, think it yellow, there was the doctor's boys— Martin, Moses, and Malcolm; and Henrietta Porter's only daughter Willow. From building two, think it blue, there was Ms. Shirley's two, Alamo and Tanya; and, Sarah Hampton's kids Chicago and Brook Lynne. From building three, think it green, there was Richie and Ricky Vasquez, Marvin Nook, and Henry-James JaQuavis, and from building four think it red, there was Nelle and Puck Joseph, Diamond Adams, and Glory Jetson.

There were more children, from The Complex and elsewhere but the ones with names were the children Mary-Beth took interest in so these names would roll through the credits at the end of what would become her critically acclaimed documentary— *Troubling in Paradise,* a title hated by her academic-advisor, cliché and austere, this academic advisor would say; but, loved by all of the producers: identifiable, relatable, recognizable, provocative, inviting, they'd say. They used more words, and Mary-Beth loved words because words, to Mary-Beth, felt like currency. Spitting no less than three syllables at a time to her, the producers made her feel rich, well off, and able to keep up. She spent just as much as she was receiving so she'd gone with them and their opinion out to dinner to celebrate what would become her critically acclaimed documentary. They ate and spoke lavishly on lobsters and lives and acclamation— mellifluous, that scene, toothsome, that one boy, beguiling and champagne passed around the table between the mouths of Mary-Beth, the two camera-men, and producers like complimentary bread.

One of the doctor's boys spoke first, the oldest, Moses, but this part would ultimately be cut from the film— what the fuck are you doing, he said to one of the camera-men who was reaching down and unzipping a navy blue canvas backpack without once taking his eye, or rather, the eye of his camera off two children jumping on a drawbridge. It was not the camera or the staring that alarmed Martin, but the canvas blue book bag. He then said— hey y'all, look at this book bag, causing all of the children, even the uncredited ones, to stop playing mid-climb, mid-swing, mid-jump, and it was this still, this image, snapshotted by the stared-at camera man that would become the documentary's cover, poster, and jacket. Wide-eyed shorties startled and interrupted, faces caught halfway between fear and curiosity.

Mary-Beth intervened. No need to be afraid. We're shooting a film about the Complex, she said to Martin. As long as you keep them from shooting-shooting, said Martin, and the children of the Complex laughed then resumed. Mary-Beth, although from just outside of here, and although not that old, didn't quite understand. See, she had spent so much time self-isolating, studying, becoming better than her mother that she missed the opportunity to go outside and double dutch. See, if you say a word twice in a row, it means what you mean by it and it means what I mean by it, Alamo Prism said after he sensed her confusion. Canvas book bags are all over the news right now, for shooting, he continued, And you said you brought them here to shoot so 'as long as you keep them from shooting-shooting' means you have our permission to shoot. Fascinating, jotted Mary-Beth in a yellow legal pad. This was the first scene of the documentary.

Alamo went back to playing after this short monologue, but the camera followed and focused on his closely cropped hair, his Father Pat's School football jersey with the number eleven ironed-on its back, his denim shorts, his muscular calves, his bunched browned sweat socks, his untied cleats, piercing tiny holes in the park's faux ground. It was this beauty, the beauty of his born-brown, and the burgundy brown of that football jersey, and the symmetry and divinity of that ironed-on number eleven— stark white and slightly peeling just at top tip right below such a seemingly propitious (for Mary-Beth and her work) last name, Prism; and, the beauty of his willingness to help, to translate, to explain, coupled with the fact that just a short decade later while Mary-Beth was making the final cuts and edits for the film's major motion picture debut, he would die tragically and heroically, that made Alamo the film's main character as audiences would call him, or the work's subject, the protagonist. His story would give Mary-Beth's shots and questions a narrative, a reason, and a hero.

Mary-Beth would keep close tabs on all the credited children, now adults still living in The Complex as still-children or were now parents themselves. A few talked to her, but most had developed the same skepticism and distrust that protected the elderly and disabled due to their portrayal in the footage's first showing— a news story, six months after this particular Tuesday in July, disrupting, distracting and dissolving families during the thick of the school year, leading to so many arguments between parents, quibbles about representation, embarrassment, and shame, leading to so many spankings and divorces in January, already so cold and harsh to the minds and bodies of boys and girls walking up hills, slipping on ice, cracking front teeth for good attendance records.

Other children had passed since playing in front of Mary Beth's camera-men, but none like Alamo, fighting fires set by hoodlums (another set of undesirable peoples—to Mary-Beth) in the tenements so close to the one she owned. How devastatingly lyrical, and good for the work this was, a teary-eyed producer, drunk on lobster and language would say at their celebratory dinner. How beautiful and kind and so willing to sense and support and save in times of need this boy had been from the very beginning, Mary-Beth would think so she assumed his parents might be the same, and they were, then, when Alamo still lived, signing the first release form after seeing that first clip coupled with shots and scenes of his playing, nicely and with others, his strength and agility used to run the course of the jungle gym at amazing speeds in beautiful ways, a long lanky traverse through the crayon pack-colored structures melded into the park's rubber mulch floor.

After his death, Mary-Beth revisited his mother, a nurse, and now also a board member, a divorcée, another standing pillar of the community. It all came together so well, so serendipitously— The Prisms were perfect for the story Mary-Beth wanted to tell, and by this time, Mary-Beth and the camera-men and their technology had aged and advanced so their ethics and questions and shots were easier to blend.

She knocks on Ms. Shirley's heavy metal door located in blue, building two:

Hi, Mary-Beth says.

Hello, answers Ms. Shirley, opening her door all of the way, afraid of no question, no shot and no camera-men. Loss has made her less fearful, jotted Mary-Beth in that ugly yellow legal pad she carried around.

I'm not sure if you remember me, but my name is Mary-Beth Turner.

Mary-Beth Turner had divorced just in time for her maiden name to appear on her final project, and although that name belonged to her mother, that mother was now dead and her status as an undesirable person, a prostitute, a hoe gave Mary-Beth a claim to authenticity. Her bio now read:

> Mary-Beth Turner is a documentarian who studied Sociology and Film at New York University after working as a social-worker for many years in The Bronx, New York where she was born and raised by books and kind neighbors while her mother, Mary-Lou "Lou" Turner, a prostitute, worked nights to provide them both a better life.

I know exactly who are, says Ms. Shirley cutting her off before she could say the whole spiel.

Well, I was wondering if I could ask you a few more questions about life here and now, and how.

—Well, I was wondering if I could sue you. My son-in-law is a lawyer.

Mary-Beth's head popped with confusion and curiosity. There had been a scene, a pretty important one to the film's success at independent festivals and on college campuses involving Ms. Shirley's daughter, Tanya, and although Mary-Beth was no longer interested in argument and research, others, those whose dissertation titles had not been called cliché, austere, and slightly unethical, wrote about this scene, used it as a primary source in their own work, and Mary-Beth knew the pain of a disproven hypothesis, an invalid thesis, a faulty argument too well to wish it upon anyone, let alone a colleague, a fellow researcher, a brother-in-arms.

Tanya is married? To a man?

At this, Ms. Shirley shifted. Her expectation: Mary-Beth would hear ‘sue’ and apologize, would hear ‘lawyer’ and plead, but she did not at all expect Mary-Beth to hear ‘son-in-law’ and interrogate. Unbeknownst to Ms. Shirley, Mary-Beth had been threatened with legal action throughout her careers as a documentarian and as a social worker and as a landlord and as an (ex) wife and as a mother, and sometimes these threats became served papers, and sometimes these served papers became depositions, and sometimes these depositions became settlements but always, Mary-Beth survived. She survived the first Complex-parent’s lawsuit— a boy not accredited but seen, shown, and depicted. And so clearly at that, his vivid green eyes and snaggletooth pointing and laughing at, coincidentally— Tanya, belonged to a woman, a woman who had successfully fled a particularly violent family with the help of social workers who were not also documentarians, and all that work undone by a five minute segment on the ten o'clock news that one night in January. They settled, relocation fees and a trust for the boy, paid by the producers. Mary-Beth survived a criminal charge, kidnapping in the first degree— the little girl was so bright and her parents wretched crack addicts, Mary-Beth said to a bookings-judge who agreed, dropped the charges, and granted these wretched crack-addicts temporary restraining orders, restraining orders that would ultimately be thrown out due to missed court dates. Mary-Beth had survived slumlord claims— never repairing faulty-stairs and sinks and windows and door handles while she was editing and rewatching clip after clip which was always, but fortunately for Mary-Beth, surviving her divorce freed her from that particular responsibility, trading her monopoly on green for

full custody of her children. A tiny loss, she called it, leaving the courtroom with a child on each hip, and a plan to build up Baltic and Mediterranean.

But sometimes she paid and she was glad to, paying these people kept her humble and self-righteous. They need it more than I do, she'd whisper in the ear of her lawyer, a free lawyer, a cousin of a camera-man and a big fan of the film, a supporter of the arts. Mary-Beth was so supported by supporters of the arts, she had no need for cash or credit. She was culturally wealthy and what Ms. Shirley, and that snaggletooth boy's mother, and her ex husband and tenants didn't quite understand was that money, for Mary-Beth, was useless compared to sentences like this: "In *Troubling in Paradise*, Mary-Beth Turner explores the dynamic quality of semi-urban rearing by pointing her camera not towards the rearers but the reared;" or this, "Turner's film is powerfully poignant, a sidesplitting hilarious portrayal of difference amongst peers;" or this, " 'You can only act like that in the house' says, Turner's protagonist, Number 11, highlighting the tension between inner and outer life, private and public space, and (in)visible identities though this admonishment of his younger sister, dubbed 'a queer' child by a well-meaning Turner and the teasing children." Cha-ching.

Washing Machine

So listen Nell, Chi and I were doing laundry, our mothers' and our own, and I was trying my best to help him figure out if he was having an affair, and if this made him a bad person. We had just loaded in my whites and his family's comforters when he started recounting. He told me that she's married with two kids and a husband who works somewhere else, and lives with someone else when he's working at that someplace else so he's also having an affair. Nell, Chi used the word 'affair' and it made me chuckle because it was so obviously taken from the soap opera playing from the TV right above the dryers. The man on the TV said it and then he said it, and I don't even think he heard that his was an echo so I said to him, Stop right there, slow down. He listened and used the time it took to get ten coins out of the brown paper roll to also collect his thoughts. Nell, you know how he can be sometimes, fidgety and easily distracted.

I still had trouble tracking. Chi was leaving out specifics, wouldn't tell me her name or what she looked like because he also had to determine whether or not she was a bad person, and if she was, whether or not he wanted me to know who she was if she was a bad person. For future purposes. As I understood it, they've always known each other, and she's older, and he loves her, but she loves her kids and her husband, and he knows her kids and her husband so he feels bad about loving her. Chi said that even I know her kids but he doesn't think I know her husband. Is this Matt's Mom, I asked him and he said, What, no, I'm not going to tell you but it's definitely not Matt's mom; however Nell, I'm pretty sure it's Matt's mom.

He continued on, reminded me even though I didn't need reminding that he's eighteen now so she's definitely not that bad of a person because at least he's eighteen.

Nell, those were his exact words. He said, At least I'm eighteen now so whatever she is, she's not that bad of a person. He told me that he could've been seventeen because he felt something for her when he was seventeen but he knew that that would absolutely make her a bad person. And then he paused for a second and looked at me for a reaction. I think he wanted to know my stance on the difference between seventeen and eighteen. He referenced a movie we saw once, he said, like that movie where that regular woman becomes a bad person because of something like this and she like goes to jail or something in the end, and then he asked me if I knew what movie he was talking about and I just said, yeah but I think it's not a movie he was talking about, it's a news story, or maybe it was a news story that got turned into a movie but either way I knew what he was talking about. Nell, he even compared it to you and I, and I didn't even know that Chi knew about you and I, but he said, Well, you must know what I mean because of you and Nell, neither of you are bad people even though someone might think you're bad people—I don't. I didn't confirm or deny you and I Nell, my whites and his family's comforters were almost done and it was helpful to look at, to concentrate on while I didn't confirm or deny. He probably added this so I wouldn't look at him and make a face that said I support or disapproved of his actions. At that point, I was just supposed to be listening. Nell, Have you told anybody about you and I? Did you accidentally start a sentence with Tanya and I once or twice without thinking? It's okay if you did, I won't think you a bad person.

So, I said to him and I motioned with my hand for him to continue, so he knew I was willing to wait until the end to say something about it all.

Well, and then he says something about her kids not ever being able to forgive him for destroying their home, and making their mother a single-mother, a bad person, a criminal, and that they weren't young enough to please, to bribe, to convince persuade or sway with candy and trips to the amusement park or ball park or water park or park-park, but they also weren't old enough to understand that sometimes two people over eighteen make good mistakes that leave some people hurt and other people happy, and that her son, refusing to understand and empathize, might even want to fight.

So, I said to him while emptying my machine into a cart and dragging my bag of colored clothes over, out, and into another washing machine, She has two kids and one's a boy and one's a girl, and the boy is old enough to fight you? Nell, do you think that was an appropriate question to ask. I didn't want to pass judgement but now I'm worried that that question might have looked like I was more interested in the gossip than his feelings, but really I just wanted him to know that I was, in fact, paying attention even though I was, in fact, also just trying to do my laundry.

He didn't answer my question and when his comforters stopped, he was also too far into the story to notice, jiggling the remaining quarters in his hand and reading the back of the detergent bottle while telling me about the sex they have. And then he said something surprising, he said, But back to the son, you know, I've got to decide whether or not I would fight him like I would fight a friend or fight him like I would fight a son.

I rolled my wet clothes over to the dryers and asked Chi to count me out fifty-four minutes worth of quarters. I thought what he just said ridiculous but lacked the heart to tell him that he didn't know anything about sons.

Chi then laid across the table meant for folding clothes, laughed to himself, and got up like he thought his last point ridiculous too. But he continued on, he said, I just know she loves her kids and that they would take the husband's side because--and then I stopped him at because because he still hadn't put his second load in, and I was almost finished. I had to tell him that I'd leave him there, and so he started moving and went back to talking about their sex.

At this point, my last load is on its second spin cycle, and there aren't even anymore suds in the machine, and he's just now telling me how it started. He said:

> Okay so you remember that snow storm last year? Well, she was shoveling out her car in the parking lot and I was shoveling out my mother's, and I asked why her son wasn't doing it and she said because he's lazy and entitled, so just to go back to what we were talking about earlier I think I would fight him like a friend, and obviously I would win. You think I would win? I mean based on what you do know, you definitely think I would win, right?

And I nodded while watching him pour bleach onto his family's colored clothes. Nell, he ruined his little brother's little league uniform. That's how crazy he is on Matt's mom. I didn't say anything though. I mean he had already poured it, what would have been the use? He continued:

> And then so, boom, as soon as she called Matt lazy and entitled, I fell in love. A year later, we're together now, but I think someone should tell her husband or like her husband should find out so she can start the process. And then it won't be a, be a.

And then he looked at me to finish the sentence for him, which I did—an affair, I said to him, which just goes to show you that affair was never his word, Nell, like I thought. And so now, my laundry is done, and you know I don't usually fold Nell, but he didn't seem to be finished talking, and my mother would be grateful, win-win, so I decided to fold and let him finish.

Anyway, he said more TV words like divorce and alimony. Started talking about jobs and groceries, and he still hadn't noticed that all his mother's stockings were a new color, burnt sienna stripes on its original black. He was smiling and looking at the machines spin and the water wash, and he hadn't even noticed that I was now even done folding, that I was loading up folded clothes into my cart, and getting ready to leave so I stopped him while he was on his eighth TV word which was either proposal or proposition. I don't remember the context and he was using them kind of interchangeably.

So I stopped him again, and was just like, Chi, I've got to go but I don't think you're a bad person but I definitely think it's an affair.

And then his washing machine finally stopped, and the beep must have woke him up a little, because he said, Hey, could you not tell anybody about this, so you see Nell, that's what took me so long today, but I'd really appreciate it, for Chi's sake, if you could keep this just between the three of us for now.

Revelations 9:7-9; 17:6

There are no vampires in the Bronx because of all of the garlic in the food, its smell seeping into the streets from the doorways of the restaurants, the botanicas, the apartments. And the people—silver on our necks, wrists, and fingers. Most of us even have it somewhere hidden in our mouths, capped molars and discreet tongue piercings. That's how I got got; my lack of experience, my respectability politics.

Bobo, who is a cop now all the way up in Fishkill, driving for hours to work and then for hours to sleep, told me that the only way to survive out there was to leave the here here so you could be your best there. He, strong from being brutally honest and alone, loaded up the car for me, and nodded nowhere specific when he said this. With his chin up like that, and his collar bones protruding, I should have noticed the puncture wounds on his neck, two healed pink holes; but, I didn't. I noticed his chain, thick silver with gold accents, a Cuban-link choker given to him by his grandmother when we were young—gone. "You'll be alright," he said tapping the hood of my car, signaling for me to go. Even now, I wonder if hindsight makes me embellish, makes me draw bitemarks where his chain should have been but definitely, absolutely, wasn't. I'm sure of this because I unfastened my own thick silver with gold accented Cuban-link choker given to me by my grandmother. I put it in my glove compartment under the car's manual, two flashlights, my insurance card, and take-out menus.

I kept hearing faint sounds of correction, of debate while giving tours. “This,” I would start to say, “is baroque” and a voice that lacked a body muttered, “Rococo.” I arched my neck, searching, but was caught in the cross-fire of camera flashes and reflection tricks, the light bouncing from their lenses to my glasses, to their glasses, to the framed paintings. I was blinded and forced to stare down at their socked feet in hiking sandals or my own museum-shoes, narrow and slightly heeled. My nose saw the vampire first because the smell shut my already low from light tricks eyes. I inhaled so deeply, I coughed twice, and my eyes began to water.

The Lady holds out an empty can of *Café Bustelo* to my nose and lifts the yellow rubber lid for me to smell. My mother is our translator. “Was this the smell?” The Lady says in their language, and my mother repeats it in mine. I inhale too deeply, and I’m back in bed with the vampire for the first time, kicking off my museum shoes and scratching down and through both of our stockings, but The Lady interrupts, closes the lid, and beats me with a palm leaf dripping in virgin water. “Your mother can’t speak this for us,” The Lady says in found English, beating me again and again on every syllable. “You need a friend that both speaks and believes,” says my mother for The Lady.

The vampire is the color of cheap ice, not transparent like the kind in good bars and expensive coffee shops but the kind you make yourself with the city’s tap water and your mother’s cubed-trays. She looks like that, feels like that, behaves like that, anemic and stuck in her ways. It was always at night. Even when I first smelled her at the museum, we were closing. I’d have breakfast, a class, a shift, and two calls to two friends to tell

them I was in love, before she even woke up. She didn't smell like that—grass, sugar, and gasoline—in her sleep. In sleep, she was back to being like ice—cold, still, opaque. I lived a whole life without her from sun up to sun down, and it worked for a while.

Bobo couldn't, didn't want to, absolutely would not help, he told me when I called him from The Lady's Botanica. She was standing right next to me, dressed in all white, praying to St. Michael and arranging Ziploc baggies of plants for me to take home to my mother's house and bathe in. "What did I tell you," he screamed into the phone, making me even more sure that I hadn't drawn on the bite marks in my rememory. "Listen here" he said, and The Lady snatched the phone from me, and slammed it onto her countertop, shattering the glass screen of my phone. I looked to my mother for help, for the word why, but she was busy picking out her own candles—a St. Anthony because she had been losing things, a white virgin to speak to my dead father about money, and a St. Jude, the patron saint of desperate cases and lost causes, for me.

I found a job, here, at home. The community college liked the fact that I worked in museums so they asked me to teach orientation classes, classes like time management and proper email communication. I did not tell them that I got fired for stealing, because I didn't think that part important. I inherited a syllabus with lessons already designed for the community: How to ignore the baby on the bus crying while you're trying to read from your textbook. How to ask your grandmother for tuition money. How to ignore the baby crying in your lap. How to transfer to a better place in time. How to stay away from your friends who don't go to this school or any others. How to make new friends that go

to this school or any and all others. I proposed two new lessons to the head of the orientation department: How to value you your space, and, How to spot a vampire and what you should do if you're already in love. "A vampire," he said with so much disbelief. "If that's a thing, it's the business of Occult Studies, not Orientation." I was looking for his puncture wounds, but his beard hid his neck. "It is absolutely an orientation issue," I argued. Still, he denied my lesson, not believing the occult a subject for orientation.

"While we wait for you to find a friend who speaks and believes," my mother began for The Lady, "Here's what you have to do," The Lady was talking slow, being kind, saying 'the vampire' in English, using my definite articles, not wanting to out me through translation. "First, never say 'the vampire's' name. Don't write it. Don't read it." My attention was split, picking up on every third word The Lady said in their language, but needing the other two to come from my mother in mine. Both of them shorter than me by more than a few inches, pulling at my chin, their hands like wet wood, branches forcing me to look into the deep brown of their eyes. "You've got to wash this smell, everyday for a year, you've got to stay here, home in the Bronx everyday for a year, get you some silver some garlic, stay out of the museums, stay away from downtown, stay out of Brooklyn, they lurk there and the smell makes you a target. Queens might be okay. If you can't find a job here, find one in Queens. You've got to come to me every Saturday. For a year. And wash this smell. If you're contacted, if the vampire reaches you, we add another Saturday, another bath, another week to your year at home. Do you have the same stuff?" My mother answered for me, in English, she said, "Yes, she brought all of

that stuff into my house." I nodded to signal that this was true. "Call an exterminator, tell him you have bed bugs. Let him do whatever exterminators do for bed bugs. Bag your clothes, wash them. Can you afford a new mattress?" My mother, again, responded for me, "No," she said to herself after posing the question *to* me *for* The Lady.

Mash

Puck jumps to his death. I wait with Nell, and we don't speak because we haven't spoken in years, but I'm here. She's married. We play a game we used to play when we were friends on the back of a piece of paper she's supposed to sign, to declare him dead. We don't play it right because we both name things, forgetting whose future this is supposed to be:

Mash

MASH

Lovers

~~Twin~~

~~Brook Lynn~~

Marvin

~~Willow~~

Cars

~~Beamer~~

~~Lexus~~

Mercedes

~~Bike~~

Careers

~~Nurse~~

Bus driver

~~Singer~~

~~Cop~~

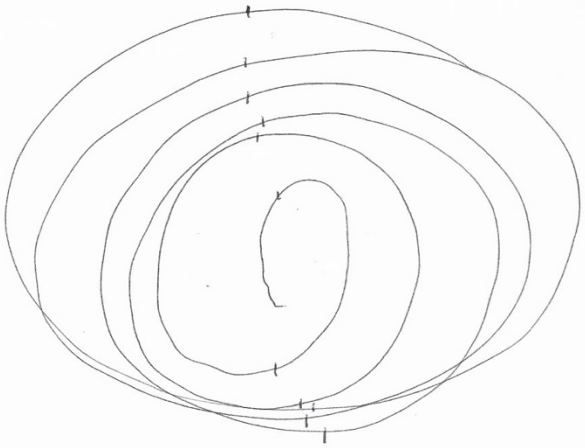
Places

~~Paris~~

~~The Bahamas~~

~~Mexico~~

Building Four



82

The Sister-Complex

One large structure, all platinum and glass and height. So large and statuesque and built with double-sided glass, interrogation-room glass, a mirror so thick and suffocating it reflected only breath and shine. The Sister-Complex made The Highway, now old and covered in grime, in scratches and skid marks, in blood and fragments—rubber, glass, and bone, look like its accessory. The Highway—once wrench, once disruptor, once disaster, oil spill, ocean splitter, a strangler of lesser reef and rock and fish too trusting, prideful, arrogant and brave to believe in its power—was now at the feet of The Sister as accessory—worn sandal strap, dirty shoe lace, a turning silver anklet.

Like it came first. Like, in the beginning there was The Sister-Complex and then The Highway, and somewhere in between, or before, or after, its sibling, created out of desperation, in fear and for cover; and, if not for The Postman and Thomas, still alive and remembering, documenting, speaking, ventriloquizing how it was and how it is and how it will continue to be, a n interested scholar, straggler, or visitor or neighbor might confuse which construction was its precursor, its bully, a rival—

;however,

The Sister was empty, soul less, all material and no people, no people to repay the payments that had already been paid to The State for the space, The Contractors for the contracts, and The Board for their thoughts and decisions so The Board met with Thomas to discuss and devise a plan and plot a course out of debt and imminent bankruptcy.

"I've called this meeting here today," said Thomas with his new voice, deep and slow so no word rose or fell, seemingly to prevent the sporadic squeaking that comes with new voices attempting to rise or fall before ready. "To talk—"

Well, of course to talk, Thomas, but boy we need—

"Please don't cut me off again," said Thomas, "with all due respect."

The boardroom which was at the very top floor of The Sister-Complex, staring only at planes, pigeons, and other winged gods passing by, went silent. Not a single member clicked a pen, or swiveled their chair, or tapped a foot, still unnerved and surprised by the sound of Thomas speaking all on his own, without a hand on his back or a mic in his ear. The oldest member, The Postman, still in disbelief of a talking-Thomas broke the silence with movement, his chair creaking as he looked under the long black table and then around the room for a box or a wire responsible. He found none, and the meeting continued.

"I've identified and isolated the problem," Thomas began again, "We don't need people. We have people. They're still children. They're staying children for too long and not becoming parents. We need parents because parents need space. We have people. But the people we have are still children and not yet parents so if we amend The Complex's constitution, revert it back to the old ways, the old way meaning before The Nurse allowed adult-children and small dogs, although I would say that the small dogs are okay, they scare me but they're okay," and just like that Thomas felt the oncoming of a crack, of a tangent, and a shriek so he stopped mid-thought and shuffled his papers.

Thomas, we promised we wouldn't—

"Yes," Thomas resumed as though this interruption recharged his thoughts and therefore his speech, "We promised we would keep The Complex out of this, but they're sisters. One should help the other, no?"

The Board nodded and an mmm bounced between each chair.

"If they were parents, they'd need nice homes. We have the nice homes, they just don't need them because they're not yet parents. We need them to participate, and everything else will work itself out. They're not participating."

Thomas boy—

"Thomas boy proposes." He stopped. "I propose we unload revamp and promote by example."

Unload, revamp, and promote by example?

"Yes, that is what I said."

Our shares, our dividends, Thomas. We're all already suffering. The Market, Thomas, it's The Market. It just needs time. It'll recover, we'll recover, we always have. Nobody needs to be unloaded, revamped or exampled.

"We don't have time," said Thomas, turning his back to The Board, choosing instead to lock eyes with the ground, a slab of sidewalk hosting a person or pigeon sitting at the building's base, between the black metal spokes meant to keep them, the pigeons—out, for fear of shit and feather coagulating against the glass, staining.

Thomas, the whole world is suffering right now. I think we just need to give it time.

"Since when has the whole world been our business, our problem, our example."

The Board nodded and an mmm again bounced between each chair.

"The shares, the expenses, the dividends, all remain exactly the same if we vote someone out and bring in someone new, a wedding planner. One of the seats needs to be given to The Wedding Planner. It's for survival," Thomas said with his back still turned, staring at the person or bird sitting in spite of spikes. "Compromise? If we bring in The Wedding Planner, and she is successful which she will be—I promise—The Sister Complex will be full and filled and we'll have people to pay back The State and The Contractors and we'll be profitable and can then vote back in the person voted out, but of course this will require sacrifice and belief. Who amongst us is too good for sacrifice?" The figure at the bottom of the building, a crow, identifiable once it began to move, to fly, almost directly up, seemingly staring straight into the eyes of Thomas, holding both eye-contact and vengeance.

The Board nodded and a softer, slower, mmm skipped between each chair— So, a blind ballot? No, we should have to voice your vote. Say it with your chest or say nothing at all. We should blind-ballot for narrowing, and then say it with our chests. We can narrow it down to three choices. That's time-consuming. Thomas said we have no time. We've got enough time for that. This is going to become a popularity contest, a longevity thing—

Thomas bent down, cracked and creased his knees, and pressed his hand to the floor to ceiling windows for support and focus, squinting at the bird flying straight up.

—It will if we voice our vote, it won't if we do a blind-ballot. It won't if we voice our vote and it will if we do a blind-ballot. How about we let Thomas narrow it down to three, he was practically made for this— to be fair, and objective, and without personal feeling or attachment.

The bird,in vertical ascent, flew right by the boardroom so quickly no one but Thomas, rising from his crouched position to lean against the glass, his whole body trying to follow the bird's flight, noticed. He was so firmly pressed that if not for the glass, his interest might have led his body out of the room, falsely believing that he would be able to continue tracing, tracking, following the flight of the strange crow.

—-Can Thomas not be voted out too? He's the face. He has no family, no friends, no otherwise occupation. It's his example they're following.

At this, Thomas turned around.

The Board nodded and a louder more confident mmm bounced between each chair.

—-The people need a better example, a new face, they're losing trust in Thomas. I think the Sister-Complex was his idea. He's the reason we're in this mess. That's unfair. We decided on The Sister-Complex long before Thomas had his own ideas. Still. We all have families and lines to consider. I've promised three of my great-great grands a unit. Who has Thomas made promises to?

Thomas attempted to speak, but "Wa" was all that came out. And a small 'wa' at that, with too much breath, halfway between a short and long vowel and perhaps an 'h,' perhaps and halfway between wait and what, so The Board chose to hear what, to further explain, to say more, to go on, and not at all to wait.

—-He has no job outside of this one. No pre-occupations. No livelihood. Is that for us to consider? Is that a statement against him or in his favor? I think that's the right decision. Look at him, without words. Let's take it as a sign. It's time to replace him. That's a lot of work. Not only will we need to vote him out, but then we'll need to vote a

new face. If we can all agree that Thomas is done, only one vote needs to happen. Can we all agree? I can't agree to that just yet. I can't agree to that just yet. I can't agree to that just yet. Convince me and I'll agree. We need a new face. Thomas represents a time no longer here. He looks like desperation and cover. We're promoting pride. The Nurse is also an option. For face? For removal? Either. Who else is an option for face? For removal? The youngest, The New Lawyer. No, the oldest. No, not The Postman. He stays. He archives. Thomas can archive. Thomas cannot face, archive, and speak. Can you boy?

"Can you boy? Can you boy? Can you boy?" Thomas reverted.

—See. Well, wait. Hasn't he always been more useful like this, he'll only have to speak and the Postman can archive and we can remove The Nurse or The New Lawyer. It was she who allowed adult children and small dogs. I love my small dog and my adult children. She shouldn't be blamed for allowing us to have things we love. What has Thomas ever loved? He said it himself—love will fix this. He said marriage. Right right right. Let's not be petty.

"Let's not be petty, Let's not be petty," sang Thomas.

—The New Lawyer makes the most sense for both firing or facing— he is a product of at least three original members, so we gage how the people feel about nepotism and we let nature run its course. We have The Nurse as backup. Making The Nurse the face doesn't solve the example-problem. She's divorced. But she has kids. One dead, one grown. That's a family. Not for what we need a family to be right now.

"Right now. Right now. Right now," repeated Thomas.

—Thomas is right. This is all taking too long. Everybody stand and speak for yourself. Here are the options: The Nurse, Ms. Shirley Prism, face or fired. The New Lawyer, Moses Smith Decatur-Jones, face or fired. And Thomas, face or fired?

Thomas voted first. He scribbled on a piece of paper that was then read by The Postman who still shared an affinity for the boy, remembering the day his quartet burned their way into his old friend's Barbershop. " I, Thomas," said The Postman into his ear.

"I, Thomas," repeated Thomas.

"Vote myself face and The New Lawyer, Moses Smith Decatur-Jones, fired."

"Vote myself face and The New Lawyer, Moses Smith Decatur-Jones, fired," repeated Thomas, a tooth falling out as he attempted to smile, grateful for the help of the last remaining original board member.

"I, James White, The Postman, vote Thomas fired," He said with his eyes closed, knees buckling, hand on the back of Thomas, neither man knowing who exactly was holding the other up. "And I vote to let the people vote between The Nurse and The New Lawyer."

Thomas, still smiling, let three more of his teeth fall into his palm.

"I, Shirley Prism, The Nurse, vote Thomas fired," she said with her head down, over clicking a pen, and digging the toe of her patent leather pump into the carpeted floor. Thomas leaned over the table, touched Ms. Shirley's nervous hand, and offered a toothless smile, a nod of understanding. She let go of her pen and took his hand instead, exchanging the click for a pat—tiny puffs of powder escaping the space between her palm and his knuckle. "And I vote, Moses Smith Decatur-Jones for the new face."

"I, Moses Smith Decatur-Jones, The Lawyer," and then he stopped, making sure everyone felt, without him having to say, where he stood on nepotism and grandfathers. "And with deep regret, utmost respect, and love for this community, I must vote Thomas fired. I also believe as husband now, and a son then, a friend to her children long before then, that Ms. Shirley won over the hearts of the back pillars of our community, the women, long ago, and for that she should be allowed to continue the political engagement she began all those years ago, and be allowed to compete against any man for the right to be the face of our next chapter."

Thomas used his last voluntary act to roll his eyes at Moses, or perhaps he simply malfunctioned, short-circuited, seized, and his eyes were the first to go, around and up into his head as he fell back, collapsing onto his leather swivel chair. Ms. Shirley turned over his hand, checked for a pulse and closed her eyes. Father Pat, the most experienced at compromise and larger picture said a prayer, and Sister Anne, the second-most experienced at compromise and larger picture kissed the forehead of his Thomas, and turned his chair toward the window, out of view, offering his body privacy, breath, and shine while the meeting resumed.

II. It would be Graffiti for Them Both

Ms. Shirley sat at her kitchen table, tapping a ball point pen on a legal pad whispering possible community issues to take a stand on— parking and security, rent control for the elderly and disabled, clinics. She took out more paperwork, spreadsheets, looked up the demographics of not only The Complex but the community at large on the

laptop Tanya had gifted her from Christmas, the one she swore she'd never use, never need, but here she was, at her kitchen table, looking up demographics:

According to the 2013 Census Bureau estimate, 45.8 % of The Bronx's population was white, 43.3% was Black or African-American, 4.2 % Asian, 3.0 % American Indian. 0.4 % Pacific Islander, and 3.3 % of two or more races. In addition, 54.6% of the population was of Hispanic or Latino origin, of any race.

56.4% of the population identified as male, 42.4% as female, and 1.2% identified as other.

Ms. Shirley didn't bother to look at age, she knew who was old and who wasn't, and that didn't matter anyway because eventually those who weren't old yet would be old, and those who were old now would be dead eventually, and there was no issue she could run on that would take in to account the not yet, would be, and eventually, so she stared at the numbers she could crunch, trying to figure out a problem she could fix that all of these numbers had in common. And then there was a knock on her door.

"Who is it?" She said from her seat.

"Me," said Tanya, visiting more often now that she was back to seeing Nell, back to using the twin bed in her childhood bedroom when Ms. Shirley was at work but Nell's husband wasn't, back to daytime sex and listening out for the echoes of jiggling keys, back to mostly-dressed nudity, shirts unbuttoned just down to the navel or pulled up right at the clavicle, jeans and pants down just to the thigh, back to rubbing thumbs across clits too quickly, leaving spots of burst capillaries just above and below bellybuttons.

"If it's you, where's your keys?" Asked Ms. Shirley, still sitting at her dining room table.

Caught between a mattress protector and a fitted sheet on Nell's bed.

"Lost 'em, Ma"

One building over and two floors up, Moses would find these keys while looking for his favorite pen, the one he carried in his pocket if ever a point needed to be made or a piece of paper needed to be signed. He slipped the keys into his pocket, walked to the bathroom, and although he hadn't had the urge, he unzipped his slacks, pulled down his briefs and sat his bare ass on the wooden toilet seat. This had been a fight. He had cushioned toilet seats in the apartment he grew up in, one building across and one floor up, but Nelle had like wood. A toilet is not a couch, she had said to him in a department store. Do your business and get up, you don't need to be comfortable all the time. A fight he now regretted losing. How dare she talk about his comforts, his spoiling, when she so clearly had been a different kind of spoiled, he thought.

Moses was sad, believed in himself enough to never quite imagine, but he knew facts about Tanya and remembered rumors about Nell, but he was always so sure they were just rumors, rumors started by childhood bullies jealous of her lips and her sweetness, of the way she was so smart and kind even to someone as shunned as Tanya had been, first for being queer as in strange, talking to herself or playing with herself or laughing to herself under the drawbridge while the rest of the children bounced atop, and then for being queer as in queer, wearing her brother's clothes all the time, before and after his death. And how kind his mother had been to that family, leaving dresses and Mary-Jane's at Ms. Shirley's doorstep both after that segment and after Mo—their two tragedies. And new dresses at that, no hand-me-downs. The doctor didn't even have any girls herself, this was just kindness.

So while Ms. Shirley and Tanya sat at a their kitchen table, one building to the left and two floors down, drinking white wine like old friends and making jokes about Tanya and lost items, Moses held Tanya's keys, two ridged pieces of bronze, browned from time and travel, attached to two keychains, a heavy silver 'T' and a rubber blue 'A.' He squeezed that 'T' until its corner punctured his palm, a tiny bit of blood for his thoughts, plotting and planning for a campaign and a divorce.

"Do you even want to win?" Asked Tanya

"Well why would I want to lose," Ms. Shirley responded.

No, a divorce wouldn't do for Moses. His entire identity relied on his image as the best possible outcome of the original experiment. He prided himself on it, studied his grandfather's books, watched and read all of the things his grandfather had made Thomas watch and read. He thought himself even better than Thomas because he wasn't a puppet, and it broke his heart that his grandfather had loved that stranger, that parakeet— Rest in piece, you fucking bird, Moses said on that toilet, Tanya's keys making him think about everything that had ever hurt him.

No, a divorce would bring shame to his line, disturb their peace, upset his mother. Not even she had filed for divorce from his flip-flop wearing father, a nuisance to the community, painting murals all over The Complex and beyond its borders, and it would be his mother, the obstetrician, who would pay the small business owners for their troubles making his father a costly burden, but what was worse than his mother paying the small business owners who didn't ask for his father's murals on their walls, was his father being paid by the small business owners who did ask for his father's murals on their walls.

Jose Maldanado had been the first. He had a flower shop on the other side of a highway, and some fools had decided to wage war on bring-your-daughter-to-work day, men dressed in yellow and men dressed in blue firing semi-automatic weapons out of civic windows, a stray bullet hitting little Jessica just as she was collecting flowers to prepare her first arrangement.

Shakir, Jose had said, I need something. We don't burn bodies in my religion and the closets cemetery is three hours up that highway, and with all that construction all that traffic, I won't ever be able to sit there without thinking about where I'm going. I won't ever make it. Give me something, please, but not her face, please not her face. Children are supposed to grow and age, and I can't look at a still-face, I'll start to see bullet holes.

Shakir, a man of few words after his days in the army, said sure. Rumor had it that he used to sing that he had a beautiful voice and soft hands that never killed, but then the highway came and nobody could hear beautiful voices over all that honking from pass-throughers, anxious to get out of The Bronx and on to Manhattan or Connecticut, so after the army he drew and painted, and for Jose Maldanado he drew a black horse, gave it wings and called it Pegasus even though all of the books and all of the myths say Pegasus was white, Shakir didn't spend enough time with books to know this. And in the belly of this winged black myth, he transcribed a poem he had learned in high school and recited in war, firing his own semi-automatic weapons with his eyes closed to the rhythm of this poem's syllables:

> A light and diplomatic bird
> Is lenient in my window tree
> A quick dilemma of the leaves
> Discloses twists and tact to me.
>
> Who strangles his extremest need
> For pity of imminence
> On utmost ache and lacquered cold

Is prosperous in proper sense:

He can abash his barmecides
The fantoccini of his range
Pass over. Vast and secular
And apt and admirably strange

Augmented by incorrigible
Conviction of his symmetry
He can afford his sine die
He can afford to pity me

Whose hours at best are wheats or beiges
Lashed with riot-red and black
Tabasco at the lapping wave
Search-light in the secret crack

Oh open, apostolic height!
And tell my humbug how to start
Bird balance, bleach: make miniature
Valhalla of my heart.

And when Shakir was done, Jose Maldanado, slightly confused but extremely grateful, asked Shakir what it meant to which Shakir replied, This kept me good in war, I hope it keeps you good in grief. A man of very few words in deed.

In fact his lack of eloquence, his inability to articulate and orate bothered Moses the most, but Moses, protected by generational privilege on his mother's side would never know or understand or care to know or understand war or grief so this conglomeration of someone else's words and his father's drawings were not at all beautiful. Yes, he agreed that these tragedies were sad and unfortunate and ugly, but what was the point of reminding folks of sad and unfortunate and ugly things. Bury your dead, and let the walls be clean, let them be smooth, let all the little shops and big buildings and alleyways and sidewalks and grounds contain no craters no pot holds no ugly little bumps, slowing down the community's progress, Moses thought there on that toilet, still holding Tanya's keys, finally relieving himself.

"Look at these numbers, what can you make of 'em?" Ms. Shirley asked Tanya, sliding the laptop in front of her daughter.

"This is your world, leave me out of this. So tired of hearing about this shit, Ma." After they'd finished fucking, Nell would talk about Moses. It was annoying to say the least, inappropriate and a little sick, Tanya thought. The worst of it was when it sounded like Moses was speaking, when Nell didn't even notice how often her sentences began with 'Well Moses thinks this' and 'Moses says that,' and Tanya, grateful to not be naked, tying her shoes, ready to be on her way out, would just respond the only way one could in this particular situation— Oh, word? And Nell, without Puck here to remind her she wasn't always in building one with the marble kitchen tops and chrome appliances forgot the language of the lesser buildings. You see, 'Oh, word?' albeit a question was never an invitation to say more. It meant stop. It meant I am politely asking you to stop speaking about this, Tanya remembered Alamo explaining to Mary-Beth Chanel Turner, a woman she would never forget, a woman whose face triggered her Tourette's, saying and shouting anything that would replace this woman's image, this memory.

Shit, fuck damn the bourgeoisie, seize the tools, is what had been said today to which Nell had asked, What, and to which Tanya had said nothing so Nell continued— I just think Mo' has some really great ideas for The Complex's future and although I love your mother, you know I love your mother right, to which Tanya had not responded, stuck on what Nell had just called her husband.

Moses is not Mo,' Nell.

Oh, no, I didn't mean anything by it, Moses can just be a mouthful sometimes and to be honest, I mean, at which Tanya cut her off and said, I'm so absolutely sure Moses is

a mouthful but I think that's something you might want to keep to yourself. Do you know if I had my keys on me?

Don't be like that, Nell said. I'm just talking about revitalizing our community.

I don't live here.

Where do you live?

You know where I live.

I know where you say you live but I've never been and even if you don't live here anymore, you're still a member of this community.

You're absolutely right I am still a member of this community, and I loved it the way it was. Why can't your husband's fucking family just chill bro? Do they have to buy and own and sell everything?

I'm my husband's family. And last I checked, your mother's had a board seat longer than my husband's been an adult.

First of all, my mother earned her board seat, your husband was born into his. And you know what Nelle, are you your husband's family? I mean, really think about why we're having this conversation.

I already told you I'm not leaving him.

I didn't ask you to do so when you said it the first time, and I'm not asking you that now.

Where are you going?

Look at the time, I'm going home.

Downtown?

To my mother's.

Will I see you again?

Don't you always. I'm a member of this community.

"Who have you been hearing talk about this?" Asked Ms. Shirley. "We're not announcing the race until after Thomas's memorial." This question was almost rhetorical. Ms. Shirley knew just like she knew when Tanya and Nell were teenagers, and just like she knew before that news segment and then that documentary ever made her story one deserving of so much sympathy— first her son dies and now her daughter's a crazy little dyke, Ms. Shirley had overheard in the laundromat from folks too uncouth to whisper. First and now, Ms. Shirley mulled over as she folded her scrubs. First and now, she thought to herself, trying to remember which came first— queerness or cameras.

Mary-Beth Turner Chanel's cameras had found Tanya underneath that drawbridge, no more than seven years old, talking to herself in verse and with so much passion, imitating her father's sermons, sermons she would only hear every other Sunday in that baptist church, a church Ms. Shirley was never welcomed in with her red lipstick and her gold-door knockers, and her gold chains, and her gold pendents and her gold bracelets, and her gold charms, and her gold rings on seven of her ten fingers; and her closely cropped hair, and her full-time job, and her designer bags; and her refusing, refusing to serve, to volunteer, to sacrifice or to wear her white scrubs to his family's church and usher his mother to a seat, a seat she needed on Sundays after a sixty hour work-week where she served and loved strangers through IV drips, and comforted families of deceased patients in thirty-minute intervals. No, there was no way Ms. Shirley was going to come home from all of that to that able-bodied man and serve, and then

serve his mother and their church on Sundays. No. Her only regret was time. If she had had one more hour, or one more free moment, she could have protected Tanya's queerness from Mary-Beth's cameras and improper use of language, but it felt like all she had time for after these shifts were chewing gum and chewing that man out— When are you going to get a job, she'd said to Alamo Sr.

I have a job.

A job that pays.

I'm a man of God.

God takes care of his children.

You don't know God, with your alters and icons and leaves, and rituals. You told me your people were Catholics.

I don't even remember you asking no shit like that, but we are Catholic so that's probably why I said it. Don't nobody need to lie to you.

Your last name was something American.

I am American.

Where are your people from?

—Nigger, where are your people from?

Brooklyn!

The Bronx, where you've been living for free for far too long, baby, you need to go.

And so he left but Ms. Shirley was not cruel or unfair, so every other Friday night, she'd drive down '95, just before the George Washington, exiting on to the West Side Highway, with 'Mo to her right and Tanya in the back, all singing a long to sad dance

songs, *Last night a DJ saved my life*, the three of them would shake in their seats, *Last night a Dj saved my life from a broken heart*, all the way to Flatbush, where Tanya would learn to listen, recite and embellish. The whole experience— the car rides, the sad dance songs, the preaching, perhaps even the fighting, the resistance to underserved servitude, the style, the warring religions within— was an education, Ms. Shirley was proud to had given both children. Clearly, it impressed Mary-Beth enough to ruin their lives.

The Scene:

Tanya in the background taking some sticks and dirt and leaves she had found just beyond the park's gates for a fallen baby bird. (You'd have to rewind or watch it a second time to see her even collect these things.) She removes a Yankee cap, belonging to Alamo, from her head, revealing slightly unkept hair, which is what first got Mary-Beth's attention. Now, how could a child of The Complex have unkept hair said Mary-Beth aloud, before asking one of the camera-men to zero in on the little girl with fuzzy pigtails.

(There was a virus ravishing the nation, Ms. Shirley and every other nurse in the world unafraid of queerness had to decide between doing their daughter's hair and saving the lives of men whose only crime was love.)

In the foreground was the doctor's boys showing Mary-Beth their muscles, well fed strong boys, good bone, slight fat. Posing and flexing. Check out my teeth, Moses can be heard saying and they were good teeth, great teeth, perfect teeth, not a space between them, not even a little yellow, but to his surprise, Mary-Beth gave him no 'Wow,' no 'Let

me see more,' no, 'And what does your mother do again?' Instead, she said 'That's nice honey' and told the cameras to shoot the little girl under the drawbridge.

There, Tanya placed the still-thing in that *Yankee* fitted, rubbed the grass on its chest like she had seen her mother do with aloe and *Vapo Rub* a million times before. And then she spoke like she had seen her father speak every other Sunday, reciting from memory the one thing that really got people up out their seats, and claiming to have been healed:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, Tanya began in a sing-song voice. I said, Tanya repeated, The Spirit of the Lord is on me. No, I don't think y'all hear me, Tanya said to her imaginary congregation. I said, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, she shouted which finally got the attention of Alamo, distracting him from the pull-up contest he entered with the twins, Ricky and Richie Vasquez.

Because he has anointed me, Because he has anointed me, which got the attention of Puck, who, even younger than Tanya didn't care or notice or care to notice the cameras pointed there way. He just wanted to listen so he jumped down from where he was on the jungle gym's tallest platform, landing unscathed and crawling under the bridge to sit with Tanya and her grass and her birds.

to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners

and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free.

What a queer child, said Mary-Beth, sending the children of the park into an uproar, a barrage of jokes snaps disses name-calling followed, forever stil land now widely available to rent own or stream.

After Forty-Five Years, Dominic Vernon's Jewelry Shop, A Cornerstone of The Community Is Closing

Rose and Ralph were to co-manage the jewelry shop, and Dominic was to go upstairs to their family-home above it and rest in peace. Their mother, Dominic's wife, wrote this in her will and then wrote it again in a letter to all of their dearest friends, and also left a note with these same instructions on the family refrigerator. She wrote it twice more in letters to an old lover and a younger sister and asked them both to see to her wishes, and so Dominic, feeling watched and insecure, boarded the windows and hot-sealed the doors with Rose and Ralph left on the outside.

Dominic had been a private man and a bad father so Rose and Ralph knew nothing about jewelry. Neither could repair a watch nor melt a stone nor appraise, adjust, or create anything. They were thirty-five, without skill, homeless business owners because their mother, Dominic's wife had been a lonely woman and a bad mother. Neither Rose nor Ralph could balance a checkbook nor make a bed, nor cook, clean, or create anything, but they were beautiful. Both Rose and Ralph had been beautiful babies who were then beautiful children and beautiful teenagers who ultimately became beautiful adults. They were brown without a pock or puncture, wrinkle or bruise. Alone, this all still rang true but together, and they were almost always together and never alone, it magnified and stretched and made their features looked shared as though there were only two eyes, a nose, and one mouth between them. They thought the same and walked the same, and even shared t-shirts. They had separate lovers always, but nothing lasted because these lovers, with or without knowing it, were attracted to them both as a unit, and with just one, they were loving just half of a person. There in the dark, twisted in

sheets and covered in spit, these lovers would always come to realize they were sleeping with a single pupil, a nostril, and just a bottom row of teeth. And at this point, the point of realization, these lovers would quickly come to writhe out from underneath their respective half of a beautiful body, and Rose and Ralph, accustomed to both rejection and smothering, cold shoulders and warm breasts, would understand, turn away and leave, going back to their family home above the jewelry shop without anger or sadness.

Standing outside there now with two brown leather bags filled with pants of their own and t-shirts to share, they watched Dominic gorilla-glue the last seal, shared a thought, and both, on their way to say it aloud uttered, "we," and then stopped. Rose let Ralph proceed.

"We should hire a jeweler," he said. "Everything will work itself out if we get a good jeweler."

They interviewed two people and had only two questions to ask, "Do you know how to repair, appraise, and create?" and "Are you willing to teach us?" The first two people had been friends of their father, and one had even loved their mother a very long time ago, holding in his hand her letters, one with her final wishes to prove it. He agreed to teach them all that he knew but admitted he could repair and appraise but not create, and the other was not willing to teach.

"I'll buy it from you," he said, and handed Rose a check.

A large thump came from the ceiling of the jewelry shop, and two more thumps seconds later like thunder. The siblings and the men looked up, expecting dust or debris to fall down or for Dominic to stomp through his floor, fall through their ceiling and fail

his wife one more time, but again, perhaps because Dominic had still felt watched and insecure, the thunder stopped.

"No thank you," Rose said, refusing to touch it and embarrassed to admit, she wouldn't have known what to do with it anyway.

They added a third and fourth question to the next interview. "Do you know how to balance the books?" and "Will you teach us?"

"Yes, Yes, Yes and Yes," said the person who would replace their father, a woman who was more beautiful than they were because she was beautiful by herself, Celine.

Celine began with Ralph. His fingers couldn't grasp the screws or mold the metal, and his mind lacked imagination in a way Rose's did not. They did purchase orders together and used the account ledgers and Celine gave Ralph three different colored pens—blue, black and red—told him what each meant and what each was for, but Ralph, alone in the back of the shop, couldn't do it without Rose and Rose could do it better and faster without him. Ralph's memory was bad because he had never had to remember anything and his fingers were thick and too soft because he had never had to use them for anything, and although Rose suffered similarly, she was patient and practiced and eventually her bad memory became good and her thick soft fingers became agile. Ralph wrote in all the wrong colors and ordered too much gold and not enough silver, although they already had enough gold and their clientele, the people in the neighborhood where they were homeless business owners, couldn't afford to purchase the gold Ralph thought was beautiful, so Celine taught him customer service instead and kept Rose in the back with her to learn, to appraise, and to create. Ralph was to open the door, and say hello,

and bag what had been sold. He was to smile and be nothing but beautiful and pleasant. He was to be in the front of the store, selling, because he couldn't at all be in the back of the store, creating.

On the fifth day of Ralph smiling, he attempted one more time to do something more. A lady, a friend of their mother, and wife of the man who tried to give Rose a check before she knew what do with checks, came in to get the clasp on a diamond bracelet repaired. Celine and Rose were in the back, doing what Ralph could not do, the books or the jewelry, so Ralph tried to repair. He put on his father's old lens and laid down a terry cloth mat. He held the bracelet in his hand and picked and prodded at its broken fastener, and in mere seconds, the bracelet and all twenty-two of its tiny diamonds rolled off the counter, around the store, and under and out the shop's door. Other customers waiting to be seen snuck a tiny diamond or two into their shoes and in their pockets, and children playing outside the door grabbed all of the ones that managed to roll under and out the door.

As Ralph tried to apologize to the friend of his mother and pick up what he could of the tiny diamonds, the stomps began again and this time, it was accompanied by laughter, loud thunderous infectious laughter that seeped through their ceiling and caused the friend of his mother to laugh, and the customers that stole her diamonds to laugh and the children playing outside with diamonds in their pockets to laugh as well. Celine, hearing all of this laughter and finding a tiny diamond that had rolled to the back of the store, just under her loafer, came to the front and like everyone else, laughed at Ralph. Everyone laughed but Rose, who placed a hand on his shoulder and brought his body of almost equal size to her for comfort and kinship. But for the first time and in a way that

didn't even happen with lovers who found him ugly when he was alone, Ralph was hurt and embarrassed, and so he brushed Rose off and left with both anger and sadness

Rose promised the friend of her mother's a replacement before Celine mentioned that they could not afford to replace twenty-two diamonds, or fourteen diamonds because eight had been found. Talking to the friend of her mother's and now just a customer no longer laughing, Rose had a thought. At the same time Celine must have had a similar or her own thought because the two began to speak at the same time. "We," they both uttered.

Rose stopped because she was used to stopping and kindly said to Celine, "Proceed."

"No, you," Celine responded.

"Please," said Rose.

And then they both gestured with their right hands for the other to continue.

"We," they said again at the same time.

"We," Rose said by herself, "Can make you something better. Something new."

Rose worked diligently and mechanically and molded and melded gold, arranged the remaining diamonds differently for weeks without luck, and Ralph, usually looking up at the ceiling, waiting for thunder, would ask, "Rose, have you finished yet?" And she would yell from deep in the back of the store, "No, Ralph." This was their routine, their only conversation. He, calling from the front, and she, yelling back, while Celine stood in the threshold, the door between their respective spaces, supervising both Ralph in his smiling and Rose in her melding.

Eventually Rose stopped responding to Ralph, needing even more darkness, she asked Celine to pick a side.

"In or out, Celine," Rose said, "there's a glare." Hearing her own abruptness, a cold inherited from Dominic in her voice, she clarified. "I'm sorry, I mean please, and thank you," and then she went back to work, blending a bit of herself with Dominic's cold.

Celine closed the door behind her, stepping completely into the front of the store to watch Ralph smile and bag correctly three times in a row before reopening the door, walking backwards into the dark. "I think he's got it," she said before sitting across from Rose's workspace.

The two of them, there in the back of the shop, in the dark, struck up a friendship, bonding over their matching tiny lenses and tiny lights strapped to their foreheads and terry cloths, screws, tweezers, and, checks and pens until, Rose, distracted by this new found friendship, dropped one of the remaining diamonds, and needed light larger than the one strapped to their foreheads so she found her father's emergency flashlights, heavy fluorescent and blinding, and still, even with her father's light, found nothing so she stood, face in hands, defeated.

Celine placed her hand on Rose's shoulder, and then her other on her other, forming an embrace, their differences fitting together like puzzle pieces, Rose shorter, Celine broader, they stood like this until the thumps began again. But there was no laughter and the thumps were slow, empathetic almost, and Ralph, annoyed at both his father up there and his father's replacement down here, stood in the threshold, watching this embrace with anger.

Rose quit. She entered the front of the shop for the first time since being taught by Celine, and prepared to call the angry customer who once was a friend. In her hand, she played with the remaining diamonds like they were marbles or dice, and listened as the phone rang, waiting to apologize to the wife, preparing herself to sell to the husband. As Rose waited for the ringing to stop, she heard the thumps, looked up and realized these thumps weren't coming from the ceiling. They were from the back of the shop, and between each thump she heard both her brother's and Celine's voices say things like 'yes' and 'please,' and between each yes and please and thump she heard grunts and moans and the ringing from the phone. Tears welled in Rose's eyes, and she squeezed the small diamonds in her hands so hard, they broke skin. She opened her hand to find it bloody and she let the tears fall onto the diamonds that laid amongst tiny droplets of blood. Rose closed her hand and her eyes one more time, desperately wanting to apologize and sell. And then, as the woman who used to be a friend of her mother, finally said hello, Rose opened her eyes and hand and said hello too.

"Yes?" The woman asked.

Rose looked down at what was now one large diamond, red from blood, glossed by tears. She dug it into the countertop, etching a small 'R' with the stone's tip into the glass. "All done," she said into the phone.

Join us in celebrating the life of Maria Rivera tomorrow in the Community Room. Rivera is survived by her four sons, Rich, Bo, Wolford, and Mill, who remain members of our Community. The Family asks that instead of flowers you contribute whatever you can to the repass in the form of dish or monetary donation.

Rich, distracted by his own tongue digging wet cracker out of a back tooth, didn't hear Mill's complaints or Bo's or Wolford's, but he knew they'd all be looking for an answer soon, his opinion rather. He just didn't know what the problem was and the cracker from yesterday that evaded his tooth brush, his pinky finger, and now all the spit in his mouth, was taunting him, causing him to wander away from conversations and refusing to give up its space.

"Do we have toothpicks in here?"

"Do we have toothpicks in here," Bo repeated Rich's question. "Are you serious?" "So we don't have toothpicks?"

"We're about to not have an 'in here' and you want to know about toothpicks." This came from Mill or Wolford or maybe even Bo again. Rich didn't know. He was busy back at his tooth, licking the molar and staring inward.

"Maybe I'll work tonight."

"When was the last time Rich worked?"

"Rich can't do it, he freaks out every time."

"We all freak out."

"Rich is cute. He'll make a lot."

"He's cute? I'm not cute?"

Rich looked at his fingernails, trying to decide which was clean enough to dig in his mouth. His pinky had already failed although it was the cleanest and its nail, the longest. His middle finger was wrapped in bandages and the nail too short anyway. His ring finger flaccid and the pointer— filthy.

“I’ll go with Wolf,” said Bo.

“You won’t make as much as Rich.”

“Rich won’t make anything at all if he just stands there.”

He decided on his thumb although it was too wide at the knuckle, and tough to fit between the crevices. After a second or two of reflexive gagging, Rich gave up, resolved to the fact that the wet cracker was now a part of him, and permanently embedded until it decided to leave on its own.

“How about we all go? Together.”

“That’s suspicious.”

“Nah.”

“Nah, what? Nah, it’s suspicious, or nah, we should go together.”

“Nah to this whole thing. We said last time was the last time.”

There’s a pencil over there, Rich thought. The eraser end could be helpful. It could reach where his fingers could not, and if it didn’t, there was also a pocket knife in his jeans that was sharp in a way his fingernails were not, and if it weren’t, there was a set of pliers in the drawer that could remove his back teeth and he’d never have to worry about too-short nails and too-thick fingers or being cute ever again.

A Quickie Divorce

Kenneth asked politely at first. He said, “Please,” and she thought he was joking because after seven years and two children and four jointly-filed tax returns, they were beyond things like ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and ‘I love you’ and ‘harder’ and ‘right there’ and ‘you’ve got it’ and ‘baby more’ so this, now, had to be a joke.

Tanya looks dumb. Her mouth's too open and he can see all the caps on her back teeth from all her childhood cavities. For a second, he believes he sees a smile, her bottom lip casting a shadow over his heather-gray high school gym shirt. "Please," Kenneth tries again. "Please leave."

Gregory Grant, DDS (Building one) sponsors young Alice Vern (Building Four), rewarding her hard work and admission to dental school with free tuition.

The baby looks like an apple, bruised and so brown he seems red. A man, blue-suited and too hairy at the knuckles, clip-board in hand and no spaces between his teeth, asks me if I understand.

“Do you understand,” he says to me.

“Yes,” Greg answers, although no one has asked him anything—not me, not the man, and not the apple. “We just ask that he keep my name,” Big Greg continues, “if that’s possible.” Gregory and the apple look alike already, hair black and spread everywhere like nighttime.

By the time I say anything to him, he’s twenty-seven, less bruised and more brown. He’s too tall. Taller than his father. He pours me water and asks me why I want to work at Smith, Houser and Loxie. His hands are ugly like mine, prominent knuckles and short nails. Hair’s still black. His name’s Moses.

“I have been cleaning whole houses for a long time,” I say to Moses, “three lawyers will be a breath of fresh air.” I want him to tell me I look familiar. Ask me if he knows me, if he’s seen me around somewhere, if I ever delivered packages to his family home where his parents, Shakir and Martha, an artist and an obstetrician, fought every Saturday at twelve in the afternoon while he played piano with a tutor two blocks down the road. If I ever worked at a grocery store where he threw temper tantrums over sugared cereal. If I ever drove a cab through a park while he lay in the back wet-mouthed unconsciously

staining Martha's dress. If I ever stood in all black, camera in hand, adjusting his chin for High School graduation photos. If I tended a bar and slid glasses on his twenty-first birthday. But he doesn't. Moses asks if I can start on Monday.

"Can you start Monday?"

"Of course."

He's messy. Three different women visit him my first month cleaning. Alexa, Patrice, and Riley. They leave behind tan panties and stud earrings. They bring him turkey on rye bread. Alexa makes the mistake of bringing ham one day. He takes a bite without knowing. He spits.

"Baby," he says to her, "I don't eat pork."

"Ms. Alice," he says to me with four ugly fingers pressed into saran wrap. "Would you like this?"

He thinks he doesn't eat pork because of the artist, Shakir. Because the obstetrician believes it's bad for him. But I know he stopped eating pork long before them, long before me too. His spit-bite sitting in a bag-less trash can tells me that it's not religion or health but his taste, the same he had before he was even an apple, throwing bacon back up my throat and to the bottom of brown paper bags. I tell Gregory about this.

"He's so tall."

"Why do you do this to yourself, pretending to be a cleaning lady just to watch him?"

"It's only twice a week. I clean up here all the time."

"That's not being a cleaner."

"He says their office has never smelled so good."

“We could have kept him.”

“And then what would I be doing now?”

Gregory doesn't like my answer and so he sleeps at his own house for a while. He has a wife, Loretta, and two daughters, Georgia and Gladys, all older than both Moses and me. The girls look nothing like the apple, save for the nighttime hair. I sleep with one, hoping it feels

perverse for reasons beyond gender, but Georgia doesn't feel like kin. Her movements are unfamiliar and there are only slight traces of Gregory and Moses there.

“Alice,” she says to me, “I know who you are.” This is after four weeks and seven meals together. This is after Moses gives me water and a cleaning job at Smith, Houser and Loxie. This is after Gregory sleeps at his own house for a while. “I don’t mind if you don’t.”

“Who do you think I am?” My white sheets have purple mouth marks everywhere and she’s making more. She’s careless, wiping sweat on my pillows, and losing false eyelashes in my comforter.

“That belongs to my father,” she says, pointing somewhere.

My eyes are busy, closed, trying to remember if vinegar and peroxide lift lipstick, if false lashes break vacuums but I know she’s right. Gregory keeps himself here in pieces and everything he owns is monogrammed— two Gs on his satchel, his underwear, his children.

Moses has lunch with his mother. She’s not yet retired although her hands look like wet wood and her eyes are small behind thick glass and black frame. She’s nice, sweet

almost. He calls her Mommy when no one is around but me. I dust while Moses and Martha eat.

“So I told her, look, how am I supposed to know what you’re thinking all the time.” “And what did she say to that?” Martha asks him.

“She goes,” Moses pauses to scroll through his cellphone for this her’s specific words, “I think we should reevaluate thinks. I think she meant things.” “Well, she definitely meant things.”

“Okay but Mommy, what does that even mean?”

“Don’t worry about it. There’ll be plenty of others,” Martha tells him and then lifts her water bottle to me, “Ms. Alice, do you think I could have another?”

“Jesus, Mom, she’s not a butler,” says Moses. He calls out to Patrice, his secretary and lover, “Can you bring in another bottle of water for my Mother?”

I go home and break dishes. Not on purpose. The first plate falls from the shelf and into the sink onto two wine glasses, one with purple lips. A monogrammed mug holding too hot tea scorches my fingertips and I drop that too. Then a bowl, a glass pan, and a flower vase. It feels like an omen. I’m not due back at Smith, Houser, and Loxie until later, much later in the week so I call my office.

“Do I have any patients, any emergencies?” I’m on vacation, three months’ vacation, maybe more, depending.

“No emergencies.”

“I’m going to come in tomorrow anyway.”

“See you then.”

I see a whole family. Mom, a root canal, Dad has an abscess. The girl needs an orthodontist. The boy has three cavities. But they all need cleanings. I send my hygienist to lunch. I clean teeth until two. I refer them to colleagues for the root canal, the abscess, the braces, and even the cavities. Big Greg is one of these colleagues.

“Dr. Vern,” he says to me.

“Dr. Grant.”

“You’re back.” He’s standing in the doorway, a blue mouth-mask hides his protruding lips.

“I’m not.”

“I see. How’s Gregory?”

“Moses is doing well.”

“You’ve gotten too close this time. You won’t be able to play this little game again.”

“I know.”

“I left something at your house.” He says this both low and loud. The patient hears. The hygienist walking between rooms hears. I hear. “What?”

“Excuse me?

“What did you leave at my house?” I say this louder. The patient hears. The hygienist standing still in a different room hears. Gregory doesn't hear.

“I’ll pick it up later.”

Moses is at his desk, quiet, and working. I spray Lysol and leave clean tissues.

Gregory dies from nothing but old age. Georgia invites me to the funeral. He was a veteran. He was a good father. He was a devoted husband. There'll never be another like him. He will be missed. All of these things are said. All of these things are true. I shake the hands of Gladys's three children: Grant, Gavin, and Goldie. I kiss Gladys on the cheek. I tell her I'm sorry for her loss. I kiss Georgia on the cheek. She holds me for too long. She cries. She's still careless, leaving her purple on my collar, my suit jacket, my neck. It's fine— vinegar and peroxide lift lipstick. I shake the hand of Loretta, Gregory's wife. She whispers near one of Georgia's purple marks.

"Can I speak to you later?"

"Of course."

We speak in a two-stalled bathroom marked Ladies on the door.

"How old were you?" She asks this as if she's afraid of the question, of my answer, of me. "When it first started." "Twenty."

"Are you lying?"

"No."

"Oh, Thank God," she says and she holds her heart "I thought he was. Well, I thought you were, you know, a child." "No."

"Good," she releases.

"Well, again I'm sorry for your loss."

"Do you have children? With him, I mean."

"No children with him or without."

“I’m sorry.”

I let Georgia leave purple everywhere that night— my tea cups, my carpet, my shower tiles.

Shakir visits next. He wears sandals and white pants. Moses rushes him into his office, passing Smith and Houser and Patrice without ‘hello.’ I’m there, in his office, cleaning windows and mirrors with two-ply paper towels and the front of my work shirt.

“Nice to see you too.” “What are you doing here?”

For a moment, I think Shakir is talking to me. I think he recognizes me as the cab driver, the photographer, and the sales-clerk but he doesn’t. It’s Moses speaking. Their voices sound like they're blood.

“I need some help.” “I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I’m getting married.” “So?”

“I can’t help you.” Moses speaks through gritted teeth. He’s red again, like the apple.

“Ms. Alice, will you please excuse us?”

“Of course.”

I clean Smith and Houser’s rooms in the meantime. I dust. I clear. I vacuum. I leave. Shakir leaves, his sandals slapping his feet. He turns around and one long dark lock falls. It seems to slice his face in half. “And another thing,” he says.

He’s looking at Moses but I’m there, right between them. He catches me staring. He looks at me. He moves closer. He looks at Moses. He looks at me.

“What are you doing?” Moses asks. “Another thing-what?”

“Nothing,” he says and he turns away again, sandal slaps echoing down the hallway.

“Patrice, can I see you for a moment?” Moses asks and he takes her inside his office and locks the door behind them. I take lemon juice and borax to the knob.

I draft a resignation letter to Smith, Houser and Loxie. Georgia suggests I misspell a few words.

“Make it believable,” she says, “I don't think a maid knows the word ‘acquiesce.’ ”

I ask Georgia to leave and to not come back. She breaks things. She throws plates, wine glasses, monogrammed coffee cups, three bowls, and a flower vase. I expect her to say things but she doesn’t. She collects everything with two Gs and leaves.

I try to leave my resignation letter with Patrice.

“You can’t quit same-day.”

“Quit?” Moses stands in his doorway. “Are you leaving us?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“Just moving on.”

“Is it another company? Can we try to match?”

“No.”

“Did something happen?”

“No.”

“Can I see you in my office before you go?”

“Of course.”

Moses pours me scotch and tells me I’ll be missed. “You know, Ms. Alice,” he says, “I

kind of feel very strongly for you, or about you, or something. Do you have that feeling too?" Moses sits at the edge of his desk, one leg up, pants high, striped sock exposed.

I shake my head no but he's already left. His eyes are to the ceiling, left hand rattling the ice in his glass, thinking about what to say next.

"I just think, maybe, since you're leaving anyway."

"No. Thank you. I'm flattered. Really." "How old are you, Ms. Alice?"

"Almost fifty."

"I'm almost thirty."

"No, Moses."

"Okay," he says, and he stands so he is too tall again, "Can I at least have a kiss goodbye? Just a small one." He shows me what small looks like with his thumb and index finger, both prominent knuckled and short-nailed.

"Very small?"

"Very small," he says.

Vandalism: Shakir Jones, 56, graffitis ‘honorary’ portrait of four brothers displaced and made homeless by The Sister-Complex. His son, Moses Decatur-Jones, 27, manager and shareholder of the property wants him arrested!

Peter is playing dominos on the street corner with his three brothers, all sitting around a card table. Angel, who’s younger than Peter but older than the others, cheats. He has his own separate set of dominos hiding in his vest’s pockets. He switches the tiles when no one is looking; however, Jon sees often and Jon likes honesty. He used to win the integrity award every year when they were school-age. Peter likes Angel more than Jon because a cheater, says Pedro, can never be a snitch.

Jon is a rat. One time, when they were young, Jon said to their mother, Mom, Peter and Angel did not come to school today. They played handball all day and then they robbed the ice man. Angel ordered cherry, mommy. When Peter asked for coconut, I knew they were up to no good, Ma. Who likes coconut? They stole the whole cart when the man turned around to search deep in his supplies for coconut syrup. Nobody else got ice. Benny cried. I had to carry him home.

Benny is Peter’s third and final brother. He never talks. When Benny is not playing dominos with his three older brothers, Benny does nothing. He cries sometimes still. Peter teaches Benny how to play dominos hoping one day, he’ll talk. The older brothers all hope even- tually, he might yell when he’s done something good, or catch Angel cheating, or call Jon a snitch, but he never does. He still cries sometimes though.

After a very good game, when Angel, of course, had won, Peter said to Benny, When will you win? He said this because Benny has never won. Jon was picking up their beer cans from the sidewalk. Benny pointed. Jon asked, this, and held out a can. Benny nodded. Peter said no. He told him, you have to verbalize, and used all of his teeth and both lips to say the word. Angel interjected, said, Let Benny drink. He's a grown man. Peter then said, No, men talk. Jon said, Ma wouldn't like it if Benny drank beer so Angel reminded him, Mom, has been dead for many years and this reminder also made Benny cry.

Not in the street, said Peter. You are getting too old to be crying, and then Pedro hit Benny in the back of the head. Jon asked, Now what was that for? Angel said, yeah, why did you do that? Peter told them both, I'm tired of his crying. Why can't he talk already? We are grown men. You are, said Jon, but Benny is the baby. If he looks so grown, asked Angel, then why can't he drink?

Benny was still crying so Peter asked, Why is he's crying if he can drink. Because Mom has been dead for many years, said Angel. His brother cheats in dominos, added Jon. Those aren't reasons, said Peter. Do those sound horrible enough for a grown man to cry all the time? Benny wiped his face and sucked up his snot so Peter gave him the drink, and threw his hands in the air.

Benny sat at his corner of their table. He pulled a domino from the breast pocket of Angel's shirt. Jon said, you caught him Benny so Benny placed it on the table. Peter said to him, Don't be a snitch. Don't be a crybaby but definitely don't be a snitch. Angel replaced the cheating-tile with one from the set he keeps in his fanny pack and they all sat down to play again.

This is every day for Peter. He has three brothers. They sit around a card table and play dominos.