

DENT IN HIS JORDANS

On the way to first period, the cheap plastic strap on my book bag broke. The single pink thread that held on for the first six months of school had finally freed itself, dropping hefty textbooks onto Deanté's spanking-new Air Jordan basketball sneakers. With only a handful of black kids at 96 percent white Edgewood High School, God let my textbooks fall at the feet of the cruelest one.

"Damn, girl! Where you get that broke-down backpack from? Alabama Thrift?" said Deanté, high-fiving two of his friends. "You ain't got nothing to say for yourself? Hey. Your book dented my sneaks. While you picking up those books, scuff that damn dent out my sneakers."

I stared at the dent in his red-and-black Jordans. That quarter-sized impression felt bigger than the entire town of Edgewood.

My eyes met Deanté's. There was pity there; I could see it. The same pity that an Asian would have for a fellow Asian, a Mexican would for a Mexican. An Indian for another Indian.

"Get the damn dent out my Jordans!"

I bowed forward to hide the tremble in my chin and the moisture gathering around my eyes. When my knees hit the floor, Deanté's crew doubled over with laughter.

"I knew she would do it, D," someone hollered.

"She's the weakest black girl I've ever seen, bruh," another voice announced.

"Get a backbone, gal!" a passerby yelled on his way to class.

Of all the races in the world, why did God put me in the only one that didn't stick up for one another? No, worse, the one that fights members of its own army: dark-skinned against light-skinned, uppity against inner city, good hair against bad hair; Deanté against Toya. I hated him—more than the insults and the ridicule. I hated that he dropped his *g*'s and added extra syllables to words that didn't deserve them. I hated his dark skin and bad hair. I hated everything about him that reminded me of myself. Deanté and I got the crap end of the stick in Montgomery, Alabama, where black was a disease.

"All right! The dent's been gone, you can get off your knees," Deanté said. But I didn't dare move.

Four sets of Jordans surrounded me—purple and white, red and black, black and gold, and finally, Deanté’s red-and-black pair. My knees pressed hard into the linoleum. I wanted the floor to suck me in and take me away from all the Jordans.

“Get up, girl,” said the black-and-gold pair.

“I know, right?” scoffed purple and white. “Black girls don’t act like that. We need to snatch her black card.”

Deanté took a small step toward me and placed his hand on my left collarbone. In my mind, I broke all five of his fingers. In actuality, I did nothing.

“Toya will be just fine when she realizes she ain’t white,” he said, before giving my shoulder a slight squeeze. “Edgewood ain’t no place for the weak.”

After a string of amens and ain’t-that-the-truths, his friends eased to their classes. “Later, D,” they said in succession.

After they left, Deanté slid his palm into the crook of my elbow, lifted me to my feet, and rushed in the direction of his friends. “Ey!” he yelled. “Y’all wait up.”

In the distance, I heard my big brother, Alex. “Toya! My God, what’s going on?”

“I—I . . .” was all I could get out before my knees buckled. Like always, he caught me before I hit the ground.

And that was it.

That dent in those damn Jordans changed the course of my life.

Later that night, I did something desperate.

“Hey, Jesus?” I whispered, looking out of my bedroom window. “I can’t take this anymore. This filth. This curse. This . . . race.” I grabbed a handful of skin at my forearm, then my thigh, followed by my breast. Tears fell from my eyes, and I curled into a tight ball at the foot of my twin bed. “I’ve done everything that you ever asked of me. I’ve obeyed you. Respected you. Loved you. So, if you ever loved me, please.” A giant brown spider crawled along the outside of my windowsill and began spinning the most intricate web I’d ever seen. The next part came out as a whimper. “You said that if I seek you first, the rest shall be added to me. Well, my *rest* is the power to wake up any race I want. Please, Lord, anything but black.”

PRAISE JESUS!

I woke up that morning as white as a Bing Crosby Christmas.

Ask and ye shall receive. Seek and ye shall find. Faith of a mustard seed. Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven and God can and will turn you white if you're a faithful enough Christian. Christians grew like weeds in Montgomery, Alabama; but awesome Christians, like me, were few and far between.

I squeezed a glob of Palmer's Cocoa Butter Lotion in both palms and polished my knees and elbows out of habit. "No more ashy black elbows and knees. Thank you, Jesus!" I shoved the jug of lotion into the Piggly Wiggly paper bag that I'd recycled into my bathroom trash can.

The thin-toothed comb glided easily through my Barbie blond hair. "Hallelujah," I said to my brand-new doe-eyed reflection.

My nose tooted up to a point. I'd always wondered how white people dug in their noses. With the nostril openings so small, how could they get a full index finger inside? I went for it. It fit fine! From the looks of it, the nostril stretched to accommodate the finger. Awesome. Even their nostrils were cooler than black people's.

"God is so good." I traced a baby-pink line around my thin lips and took a prissy half spin to admire the flattest butt anybody's ever seen. "Praise Jesus!" I hollered.

"Praise Jesus!" echoed my mom from her downstairs bedroom.

"Praise Jesus!" yelled Dad from the other downstairs bedroom.

"Praise Jesus," yawned Alex from the bedroom next door. Praising the Lord was like Marco Polo in my house.

"What are we praising the good Lord for this morning?" my father shouted.

"Does it matter, you old fool?" interrupted my mother. "We're praising God for the sake of praising God! Ain't that right, Toya?"

"Would y'all quit with the fighting?" murmured Alex. The only things my mother and father ever had in common were their mutual regard for *Unsolved Mysteries* and Jesus Christ. Outside of those two interests, they fought about everything.

I blinked at my reflection, and fish-tail braided red ribbon into my celestial hair. "Seriously, thank you, Jesus."

Before my fabulous transformation, I was the color of either a

brown Crayola crayon or a cup of coffee with a single hit of cream. I had searched high and low for me-matching shades, and those were the closest. Fingernail-short, tight, dry curls lined my scalp like tiny black pearls. My evil aunt Evilyn called them “cuckabugs,” or a head full of naps. Freshman year in high school, she said I looked like a man. Her exact words were “*Girl! You look like a man!*” The following day, I picked a rose and stuck it in my cuckabugs in the hopes of looking more like a girl. I was super satisfied with myself, too, until the ants marched into my ear, down my neck and push-up bra. The whole class jumped when I screamed like a hyena and ran down the hall: another notch in my high-school-loser belt.

“Toya! Come on, you’re making us late up there in your precious room!” Mom screamed the same line every morning, but that day her tone was especially harsh. No more procrastination. I quit my primping and cracked my bedroom door. Mom, Dad, and Alex were downstairs waiting.

They stood at the base of the staircase, in front of double anterior doors covered in extravagant tempered glass. The curving banister, oak hardwood, and *Gone with the Wind* chandelier belonged in *Southern Living* magazine. It was an opulence that most Montgomery black families couldn’t afford—most including us. Dad slaved daily double overtime and still needed Mom’s help to scrape by.

Mom and Dad worked at the Police Dispatch Center, which

received the majority of Montgomery's 9-I-I calls. Their cubicles were sandwiched together, side by side, and they were in constant competition at work. Who had the highest CPH—calls per hour? Whose calls were most challenging? Who'd received the most caller compliments? They made decent money, but the majority of every penny was reserved for the empty castle.

"Man, do you know that your shirt is as wrinkled as a Pensacola white lady?" Mom spat at Dad.

Dad clenched his teeth and took an extra-large gulp from his black coffee. "Well, if it bothers you so much, why don't you go live with your sister Evilyn, you ole quack!"

A few months back, my mom got fed up with Dad's ridiculousness—his moping, his scruffy appearance, his constant careless coffee spilling, and most of all, his empty castle—and went to live with her best friend and older sister, my evil aunt Evilyn. Mom packed a single duffel bag and ran away from home for a month. I never got a straight answer as to what set my mother off, but I woke up one random Wednesday morning and she was gone.

"That's a new one—*quack*," inserted Alex. "Good word, Dad."

"Thanks." Dad blushed, and Mom poked Alex's rib.

"Ow!"

"I wouldn't have had to come back if you didn't need help paying for your empty castle," answered Mom. "Besides, I couldn't leave my babies to fend for themselves with your crazy tail."

She was right; Dad was at least a little bit crazy. He'd packed up our perfectly comfortable three-bedroom home in the hood for a six-bedroom McMansion near the white people, only he didn't have enough money left over to furnish the thing. You would swear we were rich if you never set foot past the grand foyer to see the five-dollar pillows where the couch was supposed to be. Not to mention the pot of dried black-eyed peas, cornbread, and mustard in the refrigerator where the food was supposed to be. Lord knows, if I had to eat one more black-eyed pea I was going to slap somebody.

To Dad's credit, we could likely afford more food variety, but last year, Mom lost *Taste of Home* magazine's black-eyed pea recipe contest, and she'd become obsessed with perfecting it. She used us as her built-in test kitchen. I liked black-eyed peas, but after a few dozen days in a row, they became nauseating. Mostly, Alex and I fended for ourselves in the food department. Hallelujah for the McDonald's dollar menu.

"Toya, I see your door is cracked up there. I know you hear me!" yelled Mom. "I can't be late again, girl. Your daddy's car keeps breaking down on the way to work and making me late. Come on!"

"She's exaggerating, honey," Dad bellowed, attempting to save face. "My car is just fine. Your mother insists on filling her up with regular gas instead of supreme. The Fiat is a classic! Classics deserve nothing less than supreme."

“Man, you crazy! Who in this house has an extra dollar a gallon to pay for your piece of junk to drink gourmet gasoline?”

I honest to God love my parents, but I’d rather die a double-dead, horrible death than turn out anything like them. I’ve had a bone to pick with those two since I spoke my first word: *Toya*. How was I supposed to pass for anything but black with a name like Latoya? I asked my mom once if I could change it. I got the paperwork and everything. She told me the name meant the “victorious one” and said no, but when I Googled Latoya, I didn’t find any victoriousness, only black women looking like *Damn, why did they have to name me Latoya?*

“Lord have mercy, Toya! Don’t make me come up there!” Mom yelled.

It was time. Time to expose Jesus’s blessings and reveal myself. My breathing quickened, and sweaty thighs stuck together at the thought of showing my new white self to my old black family. Peeking through my bedroom door, I saw them all congregated at the bottom of the stairs. Dad spilled coffee and didn’t even bother to clean it up. Mom’s thumbs fixated on a stubborn blackhead on Alex’s bottom lip. “Mom! Stop!” He scrunched his face up, but he loved it. My clueless group of misfits was about to see God’s greatest miracle since Lazarus; maybe better. This was my moment, and I went for it.

PRESENTING: ME, BUT WHITE

They studied me like a Sudoku puzzle. No one spoke.

Mom broke the silence. “You’re such a beautiful girl; I don’t know why you wear those ridiculous ribbons on your head. Some girls don’t need all of that extra.”

“You look pretty, darling.” Dad spilled another tablespoon of coffee and swore loudly.

Mom opened her mouth to scold Dad, but Alex interrupted. “We’ll knock ‘em dead, little sister! You and me, we’re gonna be popular. Starting today. Did you do your History homework?” My big brother’s biggest desire was to be popular. Second biggest was to make me as smart as him—an uphill battle if there ever was one.

I ran back to the bathroom mirror.

“Where are you going?” Mom shouted after me.

I looked white to me. Was I losing my mind? No, those tendencies didn’t develop until your early twenties; I was still a teenager. They came on earlier if you smoked weed, and I wasn’t awesome enough to be offered weed, so I had a full four years before the voices started. In a panic, I ran back to the top of the stairs.

“Do I look different to any of you?” I stroked my delicate blond braid with the tips of my fingers.

Dad took a swig of his coffee and choked on the grounds. So gross. “More beautiful every day, my Toya,” he coughed.

“Are you feeling okay? You and Alex can take another day if you need to. There’s plenty black-eyed in the fridge.” Mom smiled. She had no problem keeping us home for “sick” days. I was usually more than happy to comply.

“Mom, no! We’ve missed so much school so far, and we still have two months to go. We’re going to get kicked out if we keep that up, especially Toya.” Alex jerked away from Mom’s thumbs.

“Don’t exaggerate, Alex!” Mom retorted. “I don’t trust that attendance lady of yours. Montgomery white folks older than sixty-five just don’t do right. Too much interaction with bigots ain’t good for a young person’s self-esteem. That’s the reason I wish I could homeschool you two in the first place.” Mom glared at Dad.

When he caught her stink-eye, coffee shot through his nose.

“What?” he asked, plugging his nostril with his knuckle. “You know we can’t afford for you to stay home.”

As a child, our mother experienced unimaginable racism in the Montgomery education system. Mom was the only black kid in her graduating class, and she was terrorized for it—locker vandalized on a weekly basis, gym clothes frequently stolen, and enough racial slurs to last a lifetime. As a result, she’d dreamed of homeschooling Alex and me since KinderCare. The year before we moved to the empty castle, she typed up a full curriculum and everything. I can’t remember most of it, but I do recall her plans to teach from the Bible twice daily. Homeschooling would have been her way of shielding us from Montgomery’s notorious prejudice. The empty castle squashed her dreams, and I think that was the real reason she hated it.

“It’s not the attendance lady. I’ve been counting myself, Mom,” answered Alex. “And can we please eat something other than black-eyed peas for a change?”

“Absolutely not!” she said, giddy with excitement. “The grand prize is three thousand dollars and a family trip to the Cayman Islands. We eat the black-eyed until the recipe is perfect.”

Dad took another swig of his coffee and looked away.

I began the slow, sad walk down the steps, made my way out the door, and realized that I’d forgotten my book bag. “Warm up the car, I’ll be right there. And Alex, you dropped something.”

“Oh!” He swooped up a partially opened letter lying by his left Converse tennis shoe. “Thanks, sis.”

I marched my heavy feet upstairs. The door creaked open, and there was Jesus standing in the middle of my bedroom. I’m not sure how, but I knew it was him.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” I replied. He was much more personable than you’d think for the Son of God. He reminded me of a cool English teacher.

“Your family cannot see.”

“Oh, great idea. That way they can’t disown me or make me move out. I get it. You are so smart, Jesus!” I gave him a Jesus-worthy hug, but when I pulled back to look him over, he wasn’t smiling. A single bead of sweat crept down his temple. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve always been quite fond of you, Toya. Have a seat.”

“My mom is going to get me if I make her late again,” I told him.

He laughed. “Let me worry about your mother.”

A few seconds passed before either of us spoke again. I wasn’t nervous or anxious like I am when I meet new people, but I wasn’t geeking out like the Woman at the Well, either. Was I blowing my opportunity?

“Jesus, am I blowing my opportunity right now?” I asked.

He shifted toward me. "You could never do that."

"Do you do this a lot? You know, hang out with people in their rooms? Turn people white when they ask?"

"No."

There was another long pause. He looked to be in deep thought, so I remained silent.

"Toya, listen to me. We chose you for a reason. You are a very special girl." His brow furrowed. "To be honest, my father does not believe that I should be here right now. Nonetheless, I have walked this earth as a human. I understand ridicule. Pain." Another bead of sweat crept down his temple, and he looked so deep into my eyes that I had to look away.

"Look at me," he said.

I lifted my hand to shield my eyes. "Your eyes are too bright."

He let out a little laugh. "Yeah, I can't always control that." He grabbed a pair of Dollar Tree sunglasses from my nightstand. "Here."

"Much better, thanks." His eyes were pewter gray like a sheet of freshly waxed metal. More than his face, his skin, his clothes, his hair, those eyes branded themselves into my memory.

"You're welcome. Now listen: With the exception of your immediate family, everyone will see in you what you wish for them to see. If you need me, feel free to call me. If things get tricky, don't hesitate to ask. We are giving you the opportunity to be whoever

you would like to be. But please.” Tiny veins reddened the blindingly white whites of his eyes, and a hefty tear fell to the carpet.

“Don’t lose yourself.”

“Okay,” I said.

“I love you, baby girl.”

And he was gone.

A BRAND-NEW TOYA

“You look better. I was beginning to think you were depressed,” Mom said. “Thank God.”

Thank God was right. I’d been washed clean of that dirty skin and bad hair. From that moment on, I was going to rule that school. It was the first day of the rest of my life, a brand-new Toya. Oh yeah, I probably needed to think of another name.

We packed into Dad’s 1967 Fiat. Along with the empty castle, that car was Dad’s way of proving his worth to the white people. It was a cherry-red convertible, dazzling new on the outside and a broke-down piece of crap under the hood. He’d bought it from a jackleg car salesman for way more than it was worth. When he turned the ignition, the air-conditioner vents kicked four puffs of black smoke into our faces.

“I put up an air freshener for you, Toya.” Dad flicked the green pine tree dangling from the crooked rearview.

“Lord have mercy. You old fool. Now it smells like pine-flavored gasoline, this piece of junk,” Mom hissed.

“Don’t call me no fool, woman!” Dad’s insults were never nearly as innovative as Mom’s.

“Thanks, Dad,” I replied, and he flashed a half smile.

After the twelve-minute drive to school, we smelled like sizzling electrical wires and fuel, as usual. Deanté called Alex and me the Edgewood High Mechanics. “Y’all been working at the shop this morning? You smell like you been greasing engines.” Deanté’s crew would convulse with laughter, slapping backs and stomping their feet. The whole school would stop to investigate their ruckus. How could such a small group make such an uproar? That’s how I felt about the black race as a whole, really. Hovering at around twentyish percent of the population, they made such a large presence of themselves. It was so embarrassing.

Edgewood white people, on the other hand, valued perfection in all areas. Running around the block to shed extra fat and reading books to learn extra things. I knew Edgewood perfection all too well, since Monday through Friday I sat behind its generic sixteen-year-old form—blond, and a size two with see-through blue eyes and baby-pink lip gloss. Perfection got invited to prom by the captain of the football team freshman year and wore a

corseted purple chiffon masterpiece topped with a tiara. Under the microscope, Perfection's hair was smooth and slim, just like her skin and body and her life. Deanté wouldn't dare make Perfection pinch the dent from his sneakers in the middle of a crowded hallway.

By the time we reached the school sign, my stomach was flipping somersaults, partly from my new whiteness, and partly from Dad's aggressive gear changes. I hated that car with a passion. At the entrance of the school, Dad missed second gear, stalled out, and gave a snaggletoothed grin. Mom had to let her seat up for Alex and me to squeeze through. When I rose, I could feel the eyes staring me down.

The kids at Edgewood vetted every new student from all sides—family fortune, prior academic accolades, and prestige. The last newbie had transferred from an Atlanta academy. A few weeks after his first day, the entire student body knew that he'd been expelled from his previous school for bringing a knife to campus. He was bullied relentlessly, dubbed the Ripper, and ultimately forced into homeschooling. I couldn't even remember his real name. He was, and always would be, the Ripper. That's when I realized I hadn't thought this thing through at all.

Alex elbowed me hard in the ribs. "What are you waiting for? They're all checking us out. I told you this would be the day; I can feel it." Alex bolted ahead. He wore cobalt-blue Converse, faded

black jeans, and a green T-shirt that read *Don't Be a Menace, Go to the Dentist*. Any other day, I would've thought he looked great, but that day, a tingle of embarrassment settled in the pit of my stomach.

Right there at the entrance, Mom started hollering at Dad. Alex and I whipped our heads around to find that Mom had a baseball-sized grease stain on the back of her skirt. They started fussing, so I leaped back to the car door. "Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad," I whispered. "You guys can get going now."

They paused their argument. "Bye, guys," they said in unison before clanking off.

Alex darted toward the entrance while I hung back.

The first time Alex and I had walked into the double doors of Edgewood High, our shoulders were pressed together. We felt most comfortable that way. That day I could feel the shiver in his left arm, and I'm sure he could feel the same in my right. But now, all I wanted to do was ditch him and step into God's great purpose for my life. Jesus had visited me. Not as a burnt tree, or a gust of wind, or a bright light at the end of some tunnel. No. He showered his favor upon me, and everybody knows God's favor comes with great responsibility. I mean, Abraham was told to take Isaac to the top of the hill and stab him. All I had to do was give Alex a bit of breathing room.

"Come on, Toya," Alex called to me. But none of them could see me as Toya.

I ran to Alex and whispered in his ear. “I have my period—I have to go to the girls’ room.”

“Nasty.” He shook his head and sauntered into the school. I knew that would get rid of him—for whatever reason, guys were truly disgusted by periods.

“You new?” I didn’t even have to turn around. I knew it was Deanté.

“No, Deanté . . . oh . . . uh, excuse me.” I felt his eyes beating down on me as I speed-walked to the closest girls’ room. I couldn’t help wondering how he would treat the white me. Did white people get a pass from Deanté’s wrath? Or was he an equal-opportunity a-hole? Either way, in that moment, I wasn’t prepared to deal with him.

As I entered the bathroom, other students ran to make their first classes; still, I checked every single stall for feet. My heart punched my chest so loudly it felt like the drum line took a detour through the restroom. Stress sweat made my pits smell oniony and gross, and telltale white-girl pink targets flushed my cheeks, showing the world my awkwardness. I turned toward the mirror to rebraid my hair for comfort. I still couldn’t believe the reflection staring back at me. My skin glowed golden, and my eyes sparkled like bright blue marbles. Perfection. Sweaty, oniony perfection, but perfection nonetheless.

“Lord have mercy.” I paced back and forth alone in the

bathroom when another dilemma plagued my thoughts. Did I sound white enough? “Lawd, hayuv mercy,” I said to my reflection, attempting a white Southern drawl. I threw the back of my hand to my forehead. “Oh, Lawd have mercy.” The reflection was right, but the voice was all wrong, and Deanté could spot a phony from a hundred paces. I started to panic. “What have I done?”

I needed to know if I sounded black, so I decided to call the most honest Southerner I knew. I tiptoed out of the girls’ room and down the empty hall toward the media center. I let out an involuntary sigh after a quick glance at the magazine display. The April issues of *Teen Vogue*, *Seventeen*, and *Cosmo* were in, hot off the presses. All covers featured the blond, the blue eyed, the skinny, and the white, of course. I stroked my own soft waves for reassurance.

Thank God.

I reached the shiny black no-pay pay phone in the far left corner of the media center. It looked like a pay phone, smelled like a pay phone, felt like a pay phone, but when you picked up the receiver, you got a happy dial tone without depositing any coins. The no-pay pay phone was there for the handful of bused-in students whose parents couldn’t afford to give them a cell. Everybody knew that the old-as-dirt, hard-of-hearing media center helper slept on the job, so she wouldn’t be a bother. I sat on the counter

and dialed my evil aunt, Evilyn. I always felt that my grandmother knew what she was doing when she put *evil* in her name.

“Hello,” she said, her voice deeply twanged with sugar-sweet deception.

“Aunt Evilyn? It’s Toya.”

“Oh, hey there. It’s been a while since I heard from you, little girl,” she replied. Her nickname for me had always been “little girl,” and I’d often wondered if she knew my real name.

“Yes, ma’am. I’m sorry, I’ve been busy with school and stuff.”

“Lies! I know your mama doesn’t make you and your brother go to school. Y’all at home every other day. You flunking out? You must be flunking out. Keep that up and y’all are going to be losers. I don’t want no losers in my family, you hear? You know your cousin Joyce is in her sophomore year at University of Alabama?”

“Yes, Aunt Evilyn, I’ve heard.” She’d bragged on her daughter’s success since as far back as I could remember. In high school, Joyce wore peacoats and pearls year-round to please Evilyn, but she secretly despised her mother. Two days after her graduation, she blazed rubber toward Tuscaloosa, grew a giant Afro, and pawned her pearls for off-campus housing.

“You should model yourself after someone like Joyce. She went a little off the deep end at UA, but she ain’t never been no loser. Of course, your daddy’s a loser, but he ain’t blood. He ain’t—”

“All right! Thank you for that, Aunt Evilyn. I have a question for you.”

“Yes, baby?” she replied. That voice was like Splenda: You might be fooled at first by the sweetness, but it will leave a damn nasty aftertaste and may just cause testicular cancer in laboratory rats.

“Do I talk white or black?”

“You sound like a white girl to me. Your skin is the darkest in the family, but even when you were a little girl, you always talked proper. You get that skin from your daddy’s side, by the way. When you came out of your mama, I knew you would turn black like your daddy, because your ears were darker than the rest of your body. I said, Lord have mercy, that child is gonna be the blackest of all of us, and Lord said it to be true. I was right. You a dark little girl—”

“All right! Thank you, Aunt Evil One, I mean Evilyn.” I hung up.

Aunt Evilyn could inhale the joy from a room and breathe out only bad things. I knew it, Dad knew it, Alex knew it, hell, her own daughter knew it. The only somebody in town that didn’t was my mother—Evilyn’s only real soft spot. Aunt Evilyn treated my mother like a breakable bit of priceless china. Every time Evilyn looked at my mom, her eyes filled up in weird ways like she wanted to cry but couldn’t allow anyone to see it. Evilyn was seventeen

when Mom was born, and since my grandparents had no business having more children, Evilyn took on my mom as her own. She'd always loved my mother more than anyone or anything on this earth. As a child, my mother all but belonged to her older sister, and in many ways, she still does.

After one last eye roll at the no-pay pay phone, I gathered my things and tipped past the fast-asleep media center attendant and out the door, only to run head-on into Alex.

“What’s going on with you?” he asked.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

My mouth fell open. Alex had radar that beeped like a garbage truck when I was troubled. I was cast as the only black Pick-a-Little Lady in our over-the-top production of *The Music Man*. When the teacher found out that I was failing everything but girls' choir, she kicked me out—*beep beep beep!* My big brother was there. Or that time in ninth grade when I slowly stuttered my way through a passage from *Our Town* in English class, *beep beep beep!* He was in the hallway, waiting to walk me home. I could read, just not in front of all those uppities with their fancy seersucker shorts and Lunchables. Of course my dream in life was to be one of those uppities, but I never claimed to be logical.

As he stared, my palms dampened and dread passed through my belly, resulting in a low stomach growl. For the first time in

my life, I was lost for words with my big brother. There he was, brow wrinkled with worry, eyes darting across my face in search of something only he could read.

“You skipped first period,” he said, still squinting, searching my face for valid reasoning. I forced my mouth shut, but it was too late. He knew that was one of my facial tics. “That’s it, let’s blow this Popsicle stand. You got everything?” When I nodded, he grabbed my forearm and pulled me toward the janitor’s exit.

“After what Deanté did yesterday, we should’ve just stayed home, anyway. That bastard. A powerless people turns on itself. That damn Deanté proves it.” Alex’s breathing quickened.

“Wow, Alex. Did you just come up with that?”

“Nope, Cornel West.” He stopped to check around a corner. “Coast is clear. This way,” he whispered.

I followed him closely, eager to shift the attention away from me. “We shouldn’t skip. You’re the one who told Mom we were going to get kicked out if we missed any more days.”

“Something’s going on with you. I can tell.” We tipped down the hall. “You need a day.”

“’Ey! ’Ey! Where y’all headed?” My heart jumped at the sound of Deanté’s voice.

“My God.” I stopped.

“Keep walking, Toya,” said Alex, without looking back. “Leave us alone, Deanté!”

“Wait up, dude. We cool, I just wanted to ask y’all something.” I could tell from his voice that he was gaining on us.

“Toya, go.” Alex shoved me through the janitor’s exit and stayed behind. I pressed my ear to the steel door to listen. “Look, if you don’t leave my sister alone, you’ll be sorry—I swear it.”

“What you gone do?” Deanté chuckled.

“I don’t want any trouble.” Alex’s speech was sharp and strong, which surprised me, since he hated confrontation just as much as I did. “Leave us alone.”

“That girl is extra fine. What’s up with her?”

“Deanté, stop treating my little sister like Hester Prynne.” Something rose from my brother’s voice that I’d never heard before. “Don’t test me.”

I cracked the door to see a mix of fear and confusion in Deanté’s eyes. He began backing away. “Aight, then, flunk out if y’all want to.”

A few seconds later, Alex slid through the door. “Ready?”

I looked up at him, amazed. “Thanks,” I told him, not wanting to address the threat. “Who’s Hester Prynne?”

He took the books from my hands and mussed my hair. “Wait, you’re serious?” I shrugged and he continued, “*Scarlet Letter*?”

“Never read it,” I said.

“Toya!” He threw his hands up. “Hester Prynne is the lady

who has to wear a red *A* because she committed adultery in Puritan Boston in 1642.”

“And how am I anything like her?”

“Because the crowd gathers to witness her public humiliation. Toya, I know you’re not a Puritan.” He laughed at his own joke. “And you’re definitely not a floozy. Come on, I have a copy in my room. Let’s go home.”

Our empty castle was a sturdy three miles away, with the last quarter mile all uphill. No *Sound of Music* rolling hill, either—I’m talking full-on stall-out-a-stick-shift, burn-your-legs-off, heart-attack hill. It was the tallest, most daunting hill in Edgewood—almost impossible to conquer.

When we first moved to Edgewood, I named it “the big hill,” but after a few failed climb attempts, Alex rechristened it after his favorite X-Men character, Colossus. In his comic’s mutant form, Colossus is by far the strongest member of the team. At almost eight feet tall and made of steel, he towers over Wolverine, Cyclops, and of course, Professor Xavier. Alex loves Colossus because he could easily use his height to intimidate or strong-arm, though he never does. Instead he’s soft-spoken, honest, and sweet-natured. Alex once told me he thought Colossus would make the perfect Alabamian. Only he was from *the Alabama of the future*. Alex said the phrase in passing, but it stuck with me since I knew what he meant.

The Alabama of the future: where Deanté's reign of terror is finally finished. *The Alabama of the future*: where Alex's kid sister doesn't ask God for the power to change her race.

Colossus, the big hill, was an hour away from Edgewood High on foot, an hour and a half if we stopped at Brookland Mall to go fishing for quarters in the fountain. Which meant I had at least a sixty-minute walk to convince my black sibling, birthed of our black mother, fathered by our black father, that I was white.

By the time we'd cleared school grounds and entered the creepy foot trail in the woods, the naked tree limbs cast eerie shadows that made the path floor look alive. I usually quick-walked through, but that day I took my time. "I got something going on that I need to tell you about," I said, already chewing at loose skin on my fingernail bed.

"I know you're really a sophomore," he blurted.

"What?" Alex always attempted to guess the topic rather than exercise patience and listen. He was rarely correct. No, scratch that—he was never correct.

"I know that you don't have enough credits to technically qualify as a junior, but I'll fix that. I asked Mrs. Roseland if you could do some extra credit to make up those missed tests. She agreed. I'll ask a few of your other teachers later this week. I wanted word to get around in the teachers' lounge that your big brother cared enough to ask. Teachers like that type of stuff."

“What do you mean I’m really a sophomore?” I asked. “I’m taking junior-level English.”

“I blame Mom and Dad. I read a study about tiger moms; they’re, like, the ultimate helicopter parents. They destroy their kids’ toys if they don’t do their homework. Destroy! Like bite the head off the Barbie, and stab Cabbage Patch type stuff. That’s why their kids wind up at Harvard and Yale and places. The only thing our parents ever made us do was watch reruns of *Unsolved Mysteries*. Actually, I think they might be certifiably insane.” His eyes darted around the woods, and he dropped his voice to a whisper. “Do you think we should have them committed?”

“No, Alex. Where would we go? Foster parents in Montgomery, Alabama, would turn us into Miss Celie and Harpo slaves like in *The Color Purple*.” I realized I should probably look into that whole sophomore thing. “I have something to tell you, seriously.”

“Found one!” He bent down to snag a dirty quarter. Since our parents never adequately stocked the refrigerator with anything other than freaking black-eyed freaking peas, we had a running quarter collection game. Quarters are everywhere if you look hard enough. Every day we gathered as many quarters as possible and pooled them together for dinnertime McChickens and the occasional Quarter Pounder. Alex always won. He was a quarter-spotting genius. I swear, the thing could be half-buried a mile up the road and he would say, *I think I see a quarter up ahead*.

“I have something to tell you,” I repeated. “Did you hear me?”

“Did you hear *me*? I found another quarter,” he said, amazed that I wasn’t more excited.

At that point I realized there was no ideal time to tell my brother. I decided to rip off the Band-Aid. “I’m white,” I blurted.

He twirled the found quarter between his thumb and index finger. “It’s a bit bent. Do you think McDonald’s will still take it?”

“Alex!” I squealed, getting frustrated. “Listen.”

“All right, all right.” He glided the quarter into his pocket. “What do you mean you’re white? Like white as in white? Or white as in white?” He was dead serious, too.

“White.” I unbraided my hair and held it out for him to touch. “Here, feel this. Jesus said that my family wouldn’t see me as everybody else does, but maybe you can feel the hair. Try it.”

My brother looked at me like I had morphed into a green baby alien. His shock was mixed with fear and pity. Like, *How are we going to take care of this green baby alien? It’s so little and helpless and insane.* He said slowly, “Toya, it’s going to be okay. I think our home life has given you a special PTSD thing.”

“What’s PTSD stand for?” I couldn’t help but ask.

He held the back of his hand against my forehead. “Post-traumatic stress disorder. I’m pretty sure our parents, in combination with the hyper-extremist Christian South, have given

you hallucinations about talking to Jesus. We should get home so we can do some Britannica research.”

A few years back, Mom found an almost full set of dingy brown Encyclopedia Britannicas at the Alabama Thrift. It was missing the first couple of volumes, so if we needed to know about arthritis or cancer or Botox, we were SOL. “Oh! I found another one!” He picked up a dirty quarter. “I’ve got enough for a McChicken *and* a small fry. I’ll tell you what, if you table this white issue until we get home, I’ll give you three-fourths of the McChicken instead of half.”

He really was the best. “Okay,” I said. “But can we stop by Brookland Mall on the way home to fish the wish fountain?”

“Sure. Thatta girl.” He petted my shoulders. “We should fish the arcade, too. Some of the little kids walk away without getting their return quarters. What kind of idiot would leave twenty-five whole cents behind?” He shook his head and walked on.

Brookland Mall was snob central. Any mall with a Gus Von March gave me the I’m-not-worthy heebie-jeebies. If rich old white ladies could choose where they would die, it would be Gus Von March. When the store opened at ten, they bum-rushed the doors with their fancy walkers and hand-carved canes. The day cream was a hundred dollars for the three-ounce carry-on jar; it must’ve soothed their hearts, because it sure as hell didn’t work on the

wrinkles. The designer ballet flats had mice faces on them and cost five hundred dollars. I liked those shoes, but I could draw a mouse face on a pair from the Mission Thrift Store for fourteen quarters.

I didn't want to go to Brookland Mall, but I knew my words would never be enough to convince Alex. I was going to take my brother to the mall and prove to him that I was white.

Across the street from the mall sat a skinny-people grocery store, the kind where you could taste whatever fit in the little clear cup, and where you got peanut butter from churning a giant vat of peanuts. One of our traditions was to stop in and jam the juice, our secret slang for sampling our stomachs full.

"You jamming the juice?" Alex asked.

"No, my stomach's upset," I said, holding on to my grumbling abdomen; it always gave away my nervousness. "I'll wait for you out front." When he disappeared inside, I plopped down in one of the silver patio chairs. The sun beat down especially hard in Gump-town that afternoon. Small beads of sweat dripped from my chin, so I held my head back and closed my eyes to relax.

Jesus help me, I thought. It was a prayer I'd prayed many times before. I'd prayed it as a small child, asking my mother for some worthless toy at the Hobby Shop. I'd prayed it in middle school when the hierarchy began to form, and Alex and I realized we were dead last in the lineup. I'd prayed it sometimes without even

realizing it—the rope-climb test in phys ed, the PSATs. But the prayer was different now. Jesus was there and tangible in ways he'd never been before. He was absolutely and unequivocally listening.

“Beautiful day, isn't it?”

I jumped. When I opened my eyes, a college-aged guy with dirty-blond hair, white teeth, and an Abercrombie shirt towered over me.

I scrambled to get myself together, sit up straight, and pat the sweat off. “Oh. Yes. Yes, it is,” I said softly.

“Anyone sitting here?” He flashed his teeth again. They bucked slightly big for his face, but they fit in his mouth. I nodded for him to sit. Besides, this presented a perfect opportunity to choose my accent. I figured I should try a twang other than Alabama, because Montgomery folks could spot fake Southern better than Roger Ebert.

I attempted thick Boston white. “Great idear, let's tawwk, shuaa.”

He paused. “Whoa! Where are you from? That's the strangest accent I've ever heard.” I shrugged and wondered whether I should keep talking or run away. “I'm actually really good at this type of thing.” He straightened his back in the way guys do when they're trying to appear capable. “I'm a theater arts major at the private college down the street. It's a really exclusive program. I had to audition, like, six times and then they gave me a slot. Do you watch

Fox News in the mornings?” When I nodded, he eagerly took his seat. “The lead anchor’s oldest son is in my fraternity cohort. His name’s Marshall and he’s a total douche, but we do Fox interviews, like, all the time. Do you recognize me?”

This guy was hitting on me. I’d never been hit on by anyone in my life. Maybe it was his teeth, but I can’t say I enjoyed it. It felt like a bit of an invasion of space. He just plopped himself down and started talking about his oh-so-very-important college life when all I wanted to do was have a two-way conversation with the Lord Almighty.

“Minnesota?”

“What?” I replied.

“Is that where you’re from?” I shook my head. “Alaska, like Sarah Palin?” I shook my head and realized I should trust Aunt Evelyn and stick with my own speech. “Seattle?” I frowned. “I’m sorry, I have an idea. Hey! I’ll just go through all the states, and stop me when I nail it.”

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut . . .

“What’s going on here?” Alex snuck up, holding two clear sample cups of broccoli salad.

“Who the hell are you?” Abercrombie guy said, jerking his head from Alex to me, then back again, over and over.

“You know this boy?” he asked, as if associating with Alex was the most disgusting thought ever. I shrugged and averted my eyes.

“She’s my sister!” Alex yelled.

The guy stood up and strode toward Alex. “Lower your voice, weirdo.”

Alex forced eye contact with me. “Toya, get up, now. We’re going.”

I gathered my things.

“Wait, you’re actually with this kid? You don’t look like a Toya,” he said, mesmerized. “This is bizarre. I’m out.” The guy ran off so quickly that he turned into a dirty-blond blur.

When I finally looked at Alex’s face, it wasn’t anger; it was more like a disappointed dog watching you stuff the last mouthful of a McRib. That was the look Alex gave me in that moment: pure, unadulterated sadness. “Why didn’t you tell him I was your brother?”

I dug my fingernails into my thigh. “I don’t . . . I mean. I’m white now. I told you. . . .”

“Let’s go fishing in the fountain.” He barreled toward Brookland Mall.

“Alex, hey, I’m really . . . whhhh . . . I mean, I’m . . .,” I said, struggling to catch up. I hated myself. Not necessarily for being a backstabbing turncoat of a sister, but because I could never find the appropriate words in difficult situations. Sometimes I tried to fight through the mental block, but the words always came out misshapen and made me feel crazy. Then sometimes I blurted the

words, and they felt even crazier. In my mind, my comebacks were clear and concise; in reality they were confusing and frustrating, so more times than not, I chose to keep my mouth shut.

“Found one!” He spotted a quarter in the Gus Von March handicapped zone. He’d elected to stuff the hurt down deep and move forward. Never a good idea for a guy with a photographic memory. He could remember his second, third, and fourth birthdays, and everything since; so I knew he would recall being dissed by his beloved little sister in front of the overpriced health food store. I had to make him see and quick.

“You’re totally winning. Hey, can we stop in Gus Von March?” I asked.

“I hate Gus Von March. The cosmetics counter chicks eyeball me like Alabama’s Most Wanted, and not to mention the lone dude worker. He eyeballs me for different reasons.” He glanced around and whispered, “I think he wants to give it to me.”

I laughed. “He doesn’t want to give it to you.” But really, I thought he did. “Just for a few quick minutes, pleeaassse.”

“You hate Gus Von March just as much as I do. Why do you want to go there so badly?”

“Uh . . . I want to see the mannequins for thrift store ideas,” I lied.

“Fine, as long as we’re in and out.”

We went for the same slice of the revolving door and crashed into each other, spinning a full revolution and a half before falling out into the store. The cosmetics ladies gawked at us like we had no home training, as my mom would say. Meanwhile, I could've sworn the lone dude worker checked out my brother's butt when he was picking up his book bag. Though to give the guy a little credit, three full inches of Alex's butt crack were O-U-T out! He and my dad had no butt crack consciousness at all. One time as an experiment, I sat on my bed and rolled my jeans down three inches in the back. Afterward, I decided that there is no way anyone could expose three inches of their butt crack without feeling a breeze.

As we gathered ourselves and our stuff from the marble-ish floor, the cosmetics ladies and gentleman pretended to look away. But I could still see them peeking through their respective glass cases. One clever middle-aged Lancôme lady held her compact high enough to see our reflection instead of staring dead on; she got an A-plus for effort on that one. Even the piano lady gaped from her piano-lady perch. She didn't miss a single note of her rendition of "Flight of the Bumblebee," though she had long abandoned her sheet music. Must've had the thing memorized, or maybe it was one of those programmed pianos, and she was there for embellishment. Either way, it was fertile breeding ground for trouble in the

prejudiced South, and I was about to add a pinch of Miracle-Gro to their hotbed. Hell, I didn't make their minds narrow; I was just cultivating the seed that yearned to break soil for sunlight.

Lancôme lady won for creativity. "Can we stop by the Lancôme counter real quick?" I asked. Alex rolled his eyes and shrugged a disapproving approval. The Lancôme lady put down her compact.

"Excuse me, ma'am, would you match my foundation?"

She pursed her lips. "Fine." She shook a bottle of liquid foundation, unscrewed the top, and wiped a glob on my cheek. "There."

Alex laughed. "Wow, lady, are you color-blind?"

"Actually, boy, I see color just fine. How about you?" She looked like a woman standing over fresh diarrhea.

Alex tugged my arm. "Let's go." He glanced around to see that other people were staring. "Now."

Alex, and every other black man in Alabama, had a sixth sense for discriminatory situations. He knew the exact moment to tuck tail and retreat.

"Wait. I have one more question for the Lancôme lady." I turned toward her. "What *exactly* were you doing with that mirror? It looked a little high for a nose powder."

She did a quick two-step. "I was . . . uhh . . ."

"Yeah, that's what I thought!" I said, voice rising. Alex looked on in astonishment, since I'd never raised my voice in public. Even now I felt perilously uncomfortable, but I needed to prove

my race to my brother, which sounded ridiculous even to me. “You surprised to see a girl like me hanging out with a guy like this?” I tilted my head toward Alex.

“Toya, that’s really mean.” Alex wore the McRib-disappointed-dog gaze again.

Lancôme lady’s eyes grew to double size. “Toya? You don’t look like a Toya. Is this man making you do this? Security!” she yelled.

“And just what is that supposed to mean? No! He’s not making me do this! Why would you even ask such a thing? That’s incredibly offensive!”

Alex grabbed my elbow and tugged, as two big security guys jogged toward the counter. “I didn’t mean anything by it, I mean . . . Toya?” she chuckled. “You know . . . and he’s, well.” Her eyes said it all, but not enough to convince Alex, who looked more confused than ever.

“Do you mean because I’m white and he’s *black*?” I channeled one of Mom’s screams.

“Toya!” Alex replied.

“Well . . . yes,” she said gracelessly. Alex tilted his head toward the Lancôme lady. “You know, it’s not something you see every day round these parts.”

I knew I could count on good old Gus Von March.

“What do you mean, *well, yes*?” Alex scrutinized Lancôme lady’s face for an answer, then he looked at me.

“I told you, Alex,” I said, wiping the liquid foundation from my face. “I’m white.”

That moment, the security guards reached us. “Is this man bothering you, ma’am?” Guard number one placed his hand firmly on Alex’s right shoulder, and guard number two placed his hand firmly on his left.

“Not at all, Officers.” I smiled. “We were just leaving.”

Done and done.