

ABSTRACT

The Wonder Woman Papers

by T. Tipper Thomas

The Wonder Woman Papers, is a multi-genred, multi-modal text, investigating three twenty-first century African American women relying on their friendships to confront the world. The protagonist of the story, Savannah Jordan, is forced to deal with the dangers of black urban life despite her moves to avoid and control them. These friendships at times interrupt and conflict with her relationship with her husband. Savannah is struggling to reclaim her seventeen year old son from a lifestyle that she has worked very hard to escape and is likewise growing less trustworthy of her husband's parenting. Savannah questions her husband's ability to fight what he does not know. Frank questions his wife's ability to know what she fights. The novel's various genres give the reader a feeling of looking in at the collected textual evidence of a life to be examined.

THE WONDER WOMAN PAPERS

A Thesis

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by

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The Wonder Woman Papers

Wonder Woman wore a wig. Severe anxiety overcame her every time she was called into action. She loved her job and enjoyed swooping in to lessen the damages of communist plots developing, of civilian cars colliding and of enemy government induced natural disasters. But, each time in her invisible jet, she mourned the fact that in the face of catastrophe she could only respond to and lessen, never predict and avoid. The anxiety and the medicine that she took for it caused her hair to become brittle and fall out. She had long ago bitten her fingernails down to unsightly nubs. By the end of her career, the very mention of her pseudonym reduced her to heaving sobs, acute paranoia and shortness of breath.

¹⁵ The king of Egypt issued instructions to the Hebrew midwives, of whom one was called Shiphrah, the other Puah. ¹⁶ When you are attending the Hebrew women in childbirth,' he told them, 'check as the child is delivered: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, however, let her live.'¹⁷ But the midwives were godfearing women, and did not heed the king's words; they let the male children live.

Exodus 1:15-17, The Oxford Study Bible.

Season One

Episode One

Thought you found us? Sorry. Don't be bamboozled. Look Again. Hoodwinked

The black letters on a fuchsia screen were all that popped up. I had been looking up Malcolm X's 'you been hoodwinked', 'you been bamboozled' speech for my son. Google had trustily given me a list of entries and, figuring X wouldn't be listed first, I arbitrarily skipped down to the fourth entry. When I clicked the link the computer screen did some color whirring and then took me to those words. I was in no way tech savvy but often fell into the trap of believing that all teenagers were. I hated to admit defeat though so I continued to Google. Hoodwinked in the search bar pulled up hundreds of entries, but none, and I searched a good deal of them, seemed to explain what or who this hoodwinked thing was. They had signed it, the page, so they must exist. Right? Pushing back from the computer where I had spent a fruitless sixty four minutes, I walked to the top of the basement stairs and called down to my sixteen year old.

"Jonathon, what's Hoodwinked?"

Silence rankled its way up the stairs. Though I couldn't hear it, I knew he sighed. With each passing day of the terrible teens he seemed simultaneously more immune and annoyed by the very timbre of my voice.

"I dunno."

"On computers. What's hoodwinked?"

"I dunno."

Even though he couldn't hear it, he knew I sighed.

"Seriously. I don't know, ma. Never heard of it. Although, I keep telling you computers are not my thing."

I stood at the top of the steps deciding whether I wanted to press him further. The phone rang and I kept standing there, listening to see if he was making a move to answer it. He wasn't.

"You know it's not for me," I yelled down.

I heard his feet shuffling in a 'that woman really irks me' kind of way. Unlike his father, dissatisfaction oozed out of Jonathon in a contented slave sort of way- shiftless, undying and resigned. His father high-stepped his dissatisfaction like a pert girl. High knees, stomping heels

and clipped phrases were the manifestations of Frank's refined sense of perturbed. My son was his father's polar opposite in action, though in thought, I believed them to be twins.

Jonathon appeared suddenly at the bottom of the steps holding the telephone and wearing a smug smile. "It's for you. Auntie Jill."

I extended my hand, exercising my power despite being wrong. He would bring the phone to me. I was the mother and as many times as I found opportunity, I reminded him of that. As I put the phone to my ear I heard Jill, my best friend since high school, reminding Jonathon that he wasn't too old to be excited about her calls.

"You're not too big to beat," she said.

"Girl, this is Savannah. You've been on my mind since yesterday and so I guess I thought you up. What's up?"

The silence on the phone spoke a phalanx of sorrow so long and so deep that the sound of it expanded the receiver and exploded on my ear. Her breathing had even been crowded out of hearing and in the vacuum of noiselessness I suddenly felt a quickened heartbeat and was almost sure that it wasn't mine.

"Sweetie, what's wrong? Tell me what's wrong."

"It's Tyler," she said, his name all sound and no substance.

I closed my eyes, cradled the cordless phone in both hands against my ear and cried with her, my best friend, the not mother.

Date: Thurs, 15 January 2005 8:16:09
From: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
To: doc_Layla@cincichristian.hosp
Subject: Emergency in VA

Layla,

Call me asap. Bad news from Virginia. You were on rounds when I called.

Savannah

Date: Thurs, 15 January 2005 8:19:59
From: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
To: FrankFreud@notmichaelJordanfamily.com
Subject: Emergency in VA.

Frank,

You were with patients when I called. Booking a flight to Virginia. Somebody murdered Jill's boy. He's dead, Frank. It looks so strange to type that. Jill's baby is dead. He's only four months older than our boy. Call me when you get free.

Savannah

Date: Thurs, 15 January 2005 8:24:13
From: FrankFreud@notmichaelJordanfamily.com
To: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
Subject: RE: Emergency in VA.

Home by 9:15 sharp.

"Jonathon. I need you to come upstairs for a minute."

Episode Two-Home is sometimes a very good place to be from.

April 15, 2005

Savannah:

Tyler always thought we were silly for spending hours perfecting letters to be mailed when we could have just picked up the phone and talked without even having to be at home. We could chat as I picked out grapefruit from the store or jogged on my street. But I rather like taking some time and dedicating it to people. As many people as I write to, nobody understands what it means like you do. I wrote this two days ago but figured I'd be at the post office today anyway. You rank right up there with Uncle Sam, girl.

I've pretty much decided that I'm moving back home.

I spend so much time looking into Ty's room from the hallway. I hear a garage door go up at night and in my first moments of waking assume that it's him not making curfew. All of that corny stuff that they depict on those Lifetime movies with four word titles really happens. You do hear their voices calling you from the basement. You do think you spot them in crowds behind the sports reporter broadcasting from the basketball game. You don't swoon and push your fist into your mouth though, like Melissa Gilbert. And, you don't shed a few tears and then walk away strong. You crumple in corners. You weep at the gas pump that you never had to use because your son always pumped it. The man clicked the loudspeaker and asked, "Pump number six, are you okay?" The trash builds up and your kitchen stinks. The grass grows long. Your neighbors cut it because they find it unsightly but have no capacity to bring it up since they saw you get into the family car for the funeral with your best girlfriend, her family, no husband and your mother. The casserole dishes of nasty entrees have finally stopped. All of the jogging in the world doesn't catch up to a dead son.

Every time I go out, to shop, to eat, to date, I look into the faces of the boys in low slung jeans and wonder if they did it; if someone will do it to them. Every night they report a shooting. Every subsequent morning a black boy dies. In my classroom my students try not to tell me stories of their dead. But they can't help it. To them I'm initiated now. Together we are an odd mix of members who communicate but never really connect. Their tales are warm recollections. Mine are barbed warnings. Neither one of us makes the other feel better, and daily with these stories I realize that I'm in a club I never sought to join. Maybe to increase awareness, I should start a No longer mother's day. Is that too morbid?

Jill

April 18, 2005

I don't think the no longer mothers day is a good idea. It's an important idea, but it's not so good. As much as I'd love to have you home, there's something you should know.

Cincinnati isn't what it used to be. It isn't what it was when you left.

People are crazy here now and the violence isn't much different than where you are now. Layla, over in the emergency room over at Cincinnati Christian, spends night after night plugging up holes in the young, gifted, black and dead. I can't tell you how many more people I gurney in to her waiting gloved hands since the riots. If I make one more mother holding fast to a dead or dying son I don't know what I'm going to do.

Now, I say that every time I go the firehouse but something has got to give. I've started to sneak and take pictures and little short movies of the victims with my camera phone for Jonathon. I want him to see that people suffer when they die. Don't take this the wrong way, but after Tyler got shot, I just tried to focus so much more on my own son. I don't want to have to bury him and much like Tyler, he won't admit that middle class kids can't play thugs. One minute he's asking if we're going back to Ibiza next summer, the next he's dressing up like he's got gang connections.. Jonathon seemed so bothered at Ty's funeral. I thought for sure that would be the end of pseudo-thuggishness. It was, for about three days. Even after Ty he doesn't seem to understand that when you die you can't just reboot. Maybe if you guy's lived closer to us. Maybe then he would really sense the loss, the totality of the fact that Tyler is never coming back. Frank says I'm making it worse, that I'm pandering to him, but sometimes I wonder about my husband. Too much book learning, not enough father wit. Maybe.

I just didn't want you to think that the grass was green here. I don't talk about it much once I leave work, but Jill, the grass is brown. Blood stained brown. I'm not sure that you would feel any better here, really.

Love you,

Miss Ty,

Savannah

May 3, 2005

Savannah:

Don't start with me, hear? I'm having some fantastic garage sales. Who knew my little toaster would fetch me three whole dollars. Makes the forty dollars I spent for it seem like a really bad idea. Do you remember when I raved about that thing? "But it's red steel, Savannah." That was me right? It was you that let me waste forty dollars wasn't it? You're a trashy friend.

Sav, I don't think you know how keenly aware of violence I am. I don't think for one minute that it makes you a bad friend, so you better not think it either. But, if someone cut off your arm, you would notice arms in a way that you never have before. I was sitting behind a bus load of kids coming home from something, a track meet, I don't know. Looking up into the rear bus window right above the warning that tells you the bus stops at all railroad crossings were two boys facing each other across the aisle. One jumped across the aisle at the other and, Savannah, they started into some air sparring. The sight of that. White teeth in brown faces smiling like there was nothing in the world to be considered, nothing to live in but that moment. So carefree that they can afford to feign confrontation. Would you have the energy to fake a fight? All the fighting you do on a daily basis: fires, alcoholics, the little ignorant girl with the big hair and long fingernails at the lunchmeat counter. "Next (insert sigh here)". You know how they sound, like being at work for eight hours cutting turkey is a real chink in their lives.

Well, apparently I cried so exhaustively, so intensely that I ignored the honking cars behind me at the intersection. I, evidently, cried through the late coming Good Samaritan that decided to get out and investigate my head on the steering wheel after he pulled up next to me, originally intent on cursing me out. I continued snorting through the cops rap tap taps on my window and the firefighter's observation that I had OnStar. (You're right, ya'll are so much smarter than cops). The called OnStar and had them unlock my doors. Firefighter Espinoza's human hand on my quaking shoulder made me sit up.

Warmth, Savannah, is what I need. Who's going to touch me here?

The hands of Espinoza, for me, are now in Cincinnati and as long as there is someone to lay hands on me, I can keep raising my head.

May 6, 2005

What can I do to help you come?

May 8, 2005

You can start by calling me when you got one line to write. You can end by knowing I'm not sending you back thirty-seven cents. Other than looking into the school system up there, nothing. I probably won't come until just after school starts in the fall, but maybe you can find out where I might check into substitute teaching? How is Layla? With all the mess going on up there, how is she doing? Fragile, she always seems to me.

Jill

June 15, 2005

Jill:

Let me know when you get tired of me sending you these news clippings. Layla said that the one about the twenty-two year old is completely wrong. She was working the ER when that kid came in and Layla says that he was definitely no innocent victim. The boy's mother showed up in the ER lobby screaming like a banshee and trying to fight with the boy's girlfriend about who had the right to be at the bedside. Girlfriend said mom just got out of prison on a seven year stint three months ago. Layla says the mother was drunk as a skunk when she walked into the ER lobby. Layla took her to the ground with one of those funky karate moves. Remember when she said she was taking it to relieve stress back when she was in college? Remember? Right.

July 3, 2005

Tyler was definitely killed where they found him. The police found a witness that saw someone chasing him. They actually saw my boy running for his life. Some woman on her way home from a night shift over at Kahn's Meat. She had stopped at one of the drive up money machines and saw Tyler cut right through the parking lot that night. It seems he passed about fifty feet in front of her. How does one not report something like that? Maybe she thought they were both running from the police. But, you and I both know that where he was staying with my uncle isn't a bad neighborhood. She didn't find that odd? I can't help wondering what my baby was thinking as he ran. Did he remember all the things I had told him about the consequences of one bad decision? I don't know if you remember or not Sav, but I had put all my lectures on tape. I had gotten so sick of downloading the same information to that boy that I recorded them. I would make him sit in the family room with the television off and listen to them while I worked at the kitchen computer desk. If he even looked like he was falling asleep I'd throw something at him; a pencil, a canned good, whatever I could get my hands on. He hated listening to the speeches on tape even more than he did listening to me give them.

Savannah, do you think my child cried for me before they shot him? This is the thing that bothers me most. To think that he might have cried out my name fully knowing that I couldn't be there, couldn't help him, but wanting it anyway. A son has a natural longing for his mother, I think. It's the thing that brings them home bearing weak excuses like laundry or a home cooked meal. Even drug addicts given over to the street come home every now and again. Even if mom won't let them in, they want...need to see her. I suppose that even had he been killed here I wouldn't have been able to be there when he called. My heart tells me sometimes that if he cried out my name, it was because he was sorry. Tyler, even in his last moments of life was probably thinking about what it would do to me. How he'd let me down. He always seemed so sorry for letting me down when he'd do something stupid. It's why I never once thought about giving up on him. Tyler would have been just fine.

You remember to touch Jon, okay. Always. I think that as these boys get big we stop touching them. They act untouchable, they are taller than us and we don't know where to touch. As mothers we wonder who else is touching them and are those resplendent female fingers of svelte but potentially nasty schoolgirls clean. I just hope this woman can describe the man/boy

chasing Tyler that night. If I hear anything else, I'll let you know. Does the shape of this letter help or harm?

Jill

July 15, 2005

Jill:

You never gave up on Tyler because he really wasn't a bad kid. Impulsive. Itinerantly stupid. But not bad. The clipping I sent you shows a bad kid. This fourteen year old has killed four people this summer and he doesn't seem to feel very bad about it at all. I don't know, maybe the kid wasn't bad to begin with but he certainly seems to be now. We live in a day when no one wants to call kids bad, but some of them just are. Yeah, they may have had bad upbringings or poor supervision, but at some point they know that murder is against the law just like everybody else does. We're not talking about the mentally ill or otherwise disabled. This kid lives in a world that lets us know killing folk is wrong. I have trouble excusing him. Unlike my husband, who seems to think that every murderer under the age of thirty-six and one half is to be pitied for his or her misleading. He also thinks that I can just get over my asymmetriphobia too so maybe it's just my resentment of him about it that makes me question his judgment on other things. Though at times, he does seem right about just getting over it. It took me about fifty minutes to get through that last letter. Justify, if you would please. It's just the easiest way to avoid making me hyperventilate. (I'm joking, the formatting of your letter didn't make me lightheaded from lack of oxygen.) But I did have to put it down a few times and come back to it. I appreciate the attempt at symmetrical creativity, but if you just justify the print it keeps me from really having to consider it all. I can just get over it that way. The only place where I have a problem is when the paragraphs change but usually I'm interested enough in what you have to say that I can just slip right over those. Are you sure you really still want to come here? You know I can't wait to have you close to me again, but, I want you to be sure. I want you to feel good here. Tyler isn't here either.

August 21, 2005

Savannah:

I realize that I don't drive fire trucks or mix it up with drunks in alleys. But, I'm pretty sure I can handle one small U-haul truck between Hampton Roads, Virginia and Cincinnati, Ohio. Believe it or not, I used to come back to visit all the time when I first moved here. You remember those days? Right after I got duped by a black tenderoni who could sing. Remember we used to always say that we could be real trifling for a man who could sing? How in the world did I end up getting one? You were always the one approaching men while I sat back waiting to get chosen. Wait, I just remembered how many boys/men would get that in the dark of the theater while watching a really scary movie with a date look. You know, the one that says a drop or two of urine escaped during the suspenseful part but I can't let my girl know. You're going to get this stupid note after I get there, so come and get me after you read it so we can feel stupid together. This squares us for the thirty-seven cents.

Jill

Jill returned to homeland
Long clock hand slipped over short
Flesh and time tandem

"What are you doing sitting out here?" Layla asked.

"Waiting on Jill, she should be pulling up any minute."

"Your bell not working?"

"It is," I said picking at the ant near my foot. "What are you doing here?"

Layla propped her hand on her ever growing more ample hip. "What kind of way is that to greet your college roommate?"

"It isn't any way at all, sweetie," I said pulling my torso erect and extending my arms. Layla sat down next to me, hugged me and then hit the beeper on her car alarm.

"Sorry," she said. She knew that I had always found it vaguely offensive when the Atlanta girl in her felt the need to fully secure her belongings in my black upper-class suburb of Cincinnati. What she didn't know was that after Tyler's murder, it didn't seem so offensive anymore.

"Don't worry about it," I said. I kept her hand in mine. She looked at me with the specious gaze of a concerned health professional. The emergency rooms of the American inner city had taught her to be psychiatrist, internist, chart clerk, social worker, trauma surgeon, baby sitter, OB/GYN, and temporary pulmonologist among other things. She was scanning me like an ultrasound machine.

"Jill and I used to wait on each other on the stoop like this sometimes. If she was at basketball practice after school and I had something tremendous to tell her, I would go to her house and wait for her on the stoop."

"You've got something tremendous to tell?"

I looked at Layla happily.

"What? Tell it."

We sat for a while looking at each other and in less time than either of us thought it would take, we figured out that neither of us had any idea what that tremendous thing was. It was nothing and everything.

I was anxious for Jill to love Layla as much as I had all these years. They were friends whose times crossed each other in my life and I looked forward to having them all synchronous in the same place.

Layla wanted to be there when Jill arrived, too. While we waited we thought about all the things we would do, about all the repeating events we'd add to our palm pilots. We'd do the coffee shop every Friday morning. Layla would be getting off from the ER. Friday was my

fire department Kelly Day, the only day I never worked. Jill would be subbing at a school that didn't start until nine-thirty. We turned a monthly girls' night out over in our heads. We thought about kids and we thought briefly about their various games, plays and proms. Husbandless Layla bristled at the thought of couple's night. There weren't, she made clear, many good potentials walking through the front door of her job. The flash bulb brought us out from our giddy girl talk.

"What are you doing walking?" I asked from the stoop, startled by Jill's sudden appearance from nowhere.

"Okay, I know there's a special bond between college sorority sisters, but you two look a little strange holding hands," Jill said. She snapped a second picture of us, temporarily blinding us with the glare from the bulb.

We stood up and Layla stood back while I hugged Jill, shaking her from side to side. She had cut the hair that usually grazed the bottom of her bicep. I didn't notice until I didn't feel it brush past my face as I shook her.

"Jill," I said, breathless for no apparent reason.

"I knew you'd be sitting out here waiting on me. I decided to park at the corner and walk up to surprise you. Some kinda super-aware firefighter you are. The U-haul truck sounds like a street cleaner. I can't believe you didn't hear it and at least stand up to see if it was me."

"We were planning the rest of your entire social life for you. Hey Jill, girl. It's good to see you again," Layla said stepping in for her hug. We stood looking at each other like we were going on a first date.

"Frank inside?" Jill asked.

"No, Jonathon isn't either. Just us girls for now," I said pulling Jill's belt a bit higher on the right side.

Layla, always anticipating, offered to walk back down the street to get the truck.

"No," I said, "leave it for Frank."

The comfort of a woman's friendship is not one that I have always known or fully enjoyed. While Jill had been my friend since high school, she was one of the few female friends I had during that time. Jill and I went to different colleges and so Layla followed but the closeness of that relationship was only the second of that type for me. High school football players and fraternity members all seemed more tenable connections for me. It didn't take me

long to figure out that boys either liked you or they didn't, they were either mad at you or they weren't. They perceived no personal slight because your hair style was cuter or because your boyfriend was more popular. While they might have advised your boyfriend, their friend, not to date you, once he committed to you anyway his friends moved on to more important issues.

There is, however, something very intimate about the friendships of women. Jill and Layla were, for me, something like lovers. When Frank, years before, mentioned the possibility to me it sounded and felt like an accusation. Years later, I came to accept it as true, though. Laughing with Jill on New Years Eve, the year we both turned twenty-one was like the glorious afterglow of orgasm. I remember clearly the resplendence of her warmth next to mine as we closed out the night. I was too tired and a bit too drunk to go home. She and I lay in her bed and I knew that I loved her and that she loved me. Through my champagne haze I knew that love is what made her attempt, even in the smallest things, to accommodate my illness. I named my discomfort for all things asymmetrical in college and when she laughed as I told her what was wrong with me, I laughed too.

Our friendship had endured through three states and five years of higher learning. Once Jill got her Masters in secondary English education from Hampton University she came home to Ohio to teach. Her musician led her back to Virginia when Tyler was eight. When Layla and I left Indiana University, medical school took her to Atlanta, Meharry Medical College, where she stayed through her residency and fellowship. She had only been back in Cincinnati for eighteen months. When I left Indiana with an Engineering degree, it was the perceived beginning of an incredible career. But there were no bosses making considerations for employees with special needs. Deadlines didn't care that it took me longer to get plans, memos and blueprints symmetrical enough to put my name on. Co-workers quickly grew tired of helping me stumble to bathrooms or courtyards with cool breezes and no structures with lines or ornate beds of cleverly arranged flowers. I quit before they could fire me and in the course of counseling met a firefighter in the lobby who turned me on to the job. I also caught a glimpse of the black psychiatrist in the office next to my own counselor. Frank had, rather illegally, checked my files to see exactly what my malady was after the first time he came to the lobby to retrieve his own patient and found me sitting there. One of my legs had found its way through the front split of my orange summer skirt and my very symmetrical calf and lower leg caught his eye. Relieved to find out that my problem was nothing greater than an abstract phobia, he called my illegally obtained number and arranged a perfectly balanced night.

Layla, Jill and I scrambled into the house and began to ferret through the refrigerator in search of something to eat. As we cooked, Jill began to go on and on about how the Virginia school system had engaged on a district wide campaign to get teachers technologically literate post haste.

"We've got a dropout rate that's growing exponentially there and they're concerned about whether a teacher can create a website. Most of us can barely communicate with our new Hispanic students, but they want us to include computers in our teaching modules," Jill said.

"I do okay, but on my job, who has time. Sometimes I'll have fourteen patients in the ER and a hospital on the floors above me telling me how many of my traumas they don't have a bed for when one of the section administrators will stroll downstairs, jump the blood puddles, walk right up next to me and ask why I didn't attend the training on how to link my ER reports so that the people in respiratory can better track their film usage in the ER. I'd slap them, but then I'd just have another patient write orders on," Layla said.

All of the tech talk continued on and reminded me of my as yet unsolved tech curiosity.

"Jill, have you heard of Hoodwinked?" I asked. Jill looked dumbfounded. I looked crestfallen.

"Uh Oh, have you been baited?" Layla asked.

"You know it?"

"Savannah, I've got a patient care assistant that can't keep patients registered in a timely fashion because she keeps trying to figure it out. I am so tired of going into bays to find a man or woman with a wound and no name, allergies or current meds listed. I told her that if she keeps it up I was going to make sure she gets fired," Layla said.

"Well, what is it? What does she say it is?" I asked anxiously.

Jill noticed my excitement. "Slow down there, girl. You look like you're hoping its Blair Underwood's return to black women."

"That's the foolishness of it all. The PCA in the ER has no real idea either. All she knows is that she needs some kind of programmer's codes to access it. It keeps giving her riddles to solve every time she thinks she's close to breaking through. If she answers correctly and has the right codes she might be able to find out what, exactly, it is. It could be some kind of cuckoo's group or it could be a sort of secret shopper discount program, or it could be one of those computer website myth debunking sites. The girl has no idea at all. She's just intrigued

by the idea of something potentially elite, something elusively exclusive. She said something about a greasemonkey. That's her latest discovery. That she needs a greasemonkey."

We all looked at Layla and after a few minutes of knowing silence – knowing none of them knew what it was - I asked anyway. "What's a greasemonkey?"

I couldn't even finish the question with a straight face. We all laughed hysterically.

Chopping onions for a quiche, Layla said between breaths of comic recovery, "I'll get you her number so the two of you can run down this greasemonkey together. But, Savannah, don't call that heifer at work. She's got a lot of kids to feed."

Bake ahead no-Trouble- now cakes

(Grammaw's recipe)

one emotionally disturbed friend of an aggrieved mother

one very asymmetrical emergency medical run

Fear (room temperature) (chosen according to personal taste and rolled up for easy projection)

Pinch of Unripened anger (ripe anger will make the cake rise before its ready)

1. Fold the friend into the emergency run, the batter will remain lumpy.
2. Sprinkle in several fears until they are just moistened. Stir these in quickly by hand so that they can spread evenly throughout the batter without becoming overly wet.
3. Mold dollops of the batter into shapes that the friend easily recognizes yet hates to see.
4. Add a pinch of unripened anger
5. Bake at about 230 for about fifteen minutes.
6. Remove the cakes long before they turn golden brown and then refrigerate while still hot.
7. Put the cakes back into the oven just before you are ready to serve them.
8. Cakes can be kept up to seven months before you need to make them.

Southern Trees bear strange fruit,...
Here is the fruit for the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop

-Written by Lewis Allen (Abel Meeropol), sung by Billie Holiday-

Strange Fruit

The musical tones from the firehouse speakers rang out signaling the eruption of chaos somewhere in the field. Like Pavlov's dog she rose from her chair in her cubicle, took the same route to the same pole that she always slid to the fire engine and began to recite the mantra of the experienced paramedic: secure the airway first, then support breathing, then assure circulation. It was then that she realized that the fruit smell on the leading edge of the night's serene wind was apples. She smelled it more and more frequently with each passing year of employment. She mused at the fact that, unlike Pavlov's dog, she was capable of learning new tricks.

As they approached the scene the sound of screaming, wild and loud, rode heavy on the back of the odor of apples. She thought about how odd that was. The fire engine crept through the throng of heavily armed police officers, some thirty in number, who waved them into the scene. Savannah's eye was drawn to the shotguns they held. In her fifteen years on the fire department she hadn't made a single run with police officers holding shotguns. The strange coincidences of early spring always amazed her. Apples and shotguns. A calm wind wafted over tense trigger fingers, ruffling the eyelashes of squinting and watchful eyes.

She climbed down from the fire engine waving her hands about. Savannah jumped from time to time and swiped at her own body, disgusted by the gnats and mosquitos and scared of the way that their presence changed the way the light from the street lights fell to the ground. Anxious at how the bystanders swatting at them unsettled the lines of their clothes. The screaming grew louder as she moved to the side compartment to get the medical equipment. A police officer came close and bent over to talk directly into her ear over the din of police radio traffic, victim screaming and crowd yelling.

“We got a confirmed gun shot wound. No shooter in custody and there is some report that there may be a man down around the corner on Dickson. Can you guys check that one out, too?”

Savannah shook her head no and told her Lieutenant to have another company dispatched to Dickson. She turned away from the fire engine handing some of the equipment to her coworkers, keeping one item for each hand. The wind blew and a keen sense of *déjà vu* washed over her. This moment had indeed been hers to own before. Many times before. The three men crowded in around her, eyes expectant, waiting on instructions. Savannah attempted to deflect the onus of the moment by circling around her lieutenant so that he would be the first to the patient.

“What do you need Lieutenant?” She fanned at a mosquito as she stepped back a few steps. Savannah wondered how the writhing, screaming woman on the ground in front of her was managing to ignore the moths and gnats coming and going on her back. Approaching she discovered no wounds on the mournful woman and as the pungent smell of Granny Smith’s floated into her nostrils she noticed another body—one with no head.

It was one of the most surreal moments of her life, second only to the day that her child tried to enter the world waving. One single brown hand was the only thing showing to the suddenly very nervous maternity nurse. Savannah took a minute to reassess and began at the shoes, a youthful pair of white Nikes. She recognized the hip hop label plastered all over the jeans back pockets from her son’s laundry basket. He liked the same brand. The white t-shirt, long enough to reach the top of the low slung jeans was immaculate, on the back, and the collar had but a single drop of blood just below where the seventh cervical vertebrae used to be. There was no mass of pooling blood, not fragments of large bone. For an assymetriphobic, this was bad, no lines to cordon of sections, no splatters to even attempt to pattern. There was only the occasional mass of what appeared to be freshly ground beef, no larger than a half dollar, on the stairs next to his body, on the porch five feet away, under the humming of flitting flies.

Someone had, she thought, really picked this guy off. She wondered if she said it aloud. The three men standing with her, holding equipment and waiting, acted as if she said nothing. In her inability to comprehend she had failed to act and therefore they couldn’t follow. She looked up at the three other firefighters quizzically and the vacant look made them all very nervous.

“What do you want us to do, Savannah.”

“This guy has no head.”

His asymmetry was disturbing. Savannah tried to immerse herself in the what and how of fixing him. She angled for thoughts to distract from her phobia. But, somewhere in the mental whirring of her attempts to breathe naturally and respond appropriately despite the missing balance of his head she knew that there was not how, no why, no saving.

The wind made the soft whooshing sound of late summer, the sentence that told apples to remain on tree limbs a while longer. They looked at her like baby chickens on the yard. She put the drug box that she carried onto the ground and sat on top of it.

“This guy has no head”, she said, shaking her own head hard to access the nether regions of her comprehension. The situation demanded additional neurons. He had truly been picked off. It dawned on her clearly then, that despite the summer oddity of a might-be man with no head, she could do nothing to fix it.

She tried to comprehend the writhing woman sitting next to her. A police officer came over and forced the woman away from the shoes of the dead body. Savannah tried to figure out how old she was but it was hard to tell thanks to the streetlights and the mask of hard living. The woman’s lip trembled and she looked at Savannah, her eyes begged for an explanation. She wore the overalls of a farmer but not in an agricultural way. Hers hung lower and one of the straps reclined on the lower curve of her shoulder exposing an old scar and the upper corner of her breast lustily. The woman reached out her hand to Savannah as the muscled police officer scooped her into his arms to carry away. But, her hand, that slipped shoulder strap, in this place, was horrific to Savannah and much like her son’s first wave she was inclined to shield her eyes from it. She wanted to take the woman’s hand but seeing the way she fit into the encompassing arms of the officer, Savannah knew that, like her son, it might not be the best idea to pull her out. The wind blew against the nape of her neck, turning her attention back to the headless body. The flies seemed to drone on despite the din of police radios still in search of a shooter.

She tried to figure out how old he was. His clothes said he was young but then she realized that she couldn’t even say with certainty that it was a man.

“It would be odd for this to be a woman, wouldn’t it?” she asked aloud to no one in particular. No one in particular answered. The small trickle of blood at the edge of the grass looked slick and smelled like fruit. The voices of police officers coming through the radios lowered and slowly, too slowly it seemed, a police officer walked up to her, grabbed her under

the armpit and told her to stand by but to go further down the street, closer to the fire engine. It would serve as cover; there was still no shooter, there was possibly another man down and she was the paramedic. The police officer pulled her along by the arm and it reminded her of when children were young and in trouble.

She watched her lieutenant's contorted lips as the words oozed out of his mouth like cold syrup, "We have to take cover near the engine. Are you all right Savannah?" His voice sounded like a broken tape recorder, distorted and slow. She noticed that his eyes were uneven.

No," she said sounding no different from him despite the speed of her thoughts, "no, I'm not all right. I'm disturbed. This is very disturbing." He looked at her as if she had staunchly damned him to hell and backed away like she brandished a knife

Savannah asked the police officer, "Why in the hell would you all call us for this anyway? What did you expect me to do?"

The police officer smiled playfully and answered, "Even if we'd have shot him, fire would still have to pronounce him. Cost of being the medic. Don't blame me because you took the wrong civil service test." He dropped her off near the fire engine, some twenty or so feet away and let the drug box wallop to the ground.

She tried to run to the fire engine but her legs wouldn't comply. They felt heavy and the distance between her and the engine seemed to stretch out eternally. She tried not to concentrate on it. She looked down and wondered how long the moth had been on her left breast pocket. One of the police officers was stringing yellow barrier tape around the space between her and the fire engine. The lights from the police helicopter fell down on her. She felt like banded broccoli on sale under the sprinklers. The police officer swatted the bug off her pocket as he passed causing her to recoil and smell the apples.

The long walk on soft legs afforded her the opportunity to look and see. Mothers, fathers and boyfriends were hurrying young children to their front doors to gaze upon the headless body. The sobbing of the masked woman, now sitting on the wide tailboard of the fire truck, blended eerily with the cheers of the children until they sounded the same. The adults paraded the children back and forth on the sidewalk so that they could see this wondrous thing. Some children had obviously been dressed for the occasion, had been given shoes in the middle of the night. Mothers shoved nightgowns into shorts like shirts. Their animated brown faces swung under arms like little baskets. Savannah wondered how they justified throwing off the children's

schedules. She thought about the clock approaching midnight and wondered if her own child were out in this fruity, dark night. There was a definite place for sleep in the rhythm of life and she imagined that a little night dormancy might have helped some body keep a head. Savannah worked to choke back a sudden fury aimed at the adults but then turned her emotions on the dead body. In his presence the children seemed to grow taller and fatter before her eyes. A ten year old boy stood on the porch railing to ogle the headless body and grew a mustache when he stepped down. The baby under arm studied the bugs as they flit about near the place where a head should have been. He then climbed down from under his mother's arm and walked away, the pale red of his infantile cheeks darkened up to the full faced sienna of toddling twos.

They sure got him good said a little boy. He looked no older than three. Someone started singing a rap song; something about a barrel in your mouth. Who would pick him questioned a middle age woman with tears in her eyes. Savannah stopped in the middle of the street, cordoned off by police barrier tape. In the safety of the space she moved forward and back, turned around and around until she got dizzy. She kept trying to make the shape in that space fit properly. Her co-workers watched in nervous amazement. She tried her best to see all of the people on the street that smelled so good. An old woman in the top apartment walked to her window for the sole purpose of closing her blinds. From a distance, she studied again the young shoes and the white shirt lying chest down on the ground. His skin darkened and his clothes seemed to wilt as the dew of deepest night began to form under his body. The warmth of the open body met with the chill of night and the apple wind blew the visible contrast across the street, pushing the noisy flies ahead of it. It landed, sticky on the clothes, hands and heads of those watching. Some fanned the bugs away. Was he the reason that the night smelled of fruit, was it his juice? She wanted to shield the children from the wind but there were too many scattered here and there not fitting into the curved space next to a mother's leg. Too many of them did not taper off the forms of fathers because they sat on father's shoulders. There were too many parts to put into proper places and she was one woman. She would have to focus on something else.

Savannah watched the composed faces of the crowd and the stillness of matter lying on the grass. She watched her co-workers as they watched her, uncomfortable with her discomfort, unfamiliar with this Savannah who had failed to lead and direct. She mourned the waste wondering how delightfully sweet he might have been to the writhing wifemothersister. Turning

in circles she saw several young boys in the trees across the street. Savannah prayed that their mothers would call them inside lest they fall off. They didn't belong there, odd bumps on straight branches. She saw the faces of children with snotty noses and festooning diapers held high in order to see, in order to be adequately touched by the smell of fruit carried on the breath of wind. They looked back at her and smiled unwittingly. They laughed and gestured until Savannah stopped spinning and threw up. Then they were all disgusted.

"Mom, need deodorant"

The sign on the refrigerator when she arrived at home the next morning was simple to a fault. No please to soften the request. No signature to personalize the chore. Her son was seventeen and it seemed that after each twenty-four hour shift at work she returned to the presence of a changeling in her temporarily motherless home. She used to play a board game with him when he was little, one where you had to guess your opponent's mystery person by asking questions about his characteristics and turning down the face cards with or without certain features. After each tour at the firehouse she felt as if she wanted, needed to play that game with him again. She wanted to see which characteristics he had shed while she was gone. She needed to know, daily what his face looked like when a certain gym shoe had become alarmingly uncool while she was at work; what soft lines disappeared since he had been practicing his rap star smile-sneer in the mirror.

She noticed the flashing light on the answering machine and her husband's voice told her to move the big screen television and retrieve the watch that he had dropped behind it this morning as he prepared for work. He couldn't wait to hear about her day, or so he said. People were often entertained by her stories of the pretending- to- be- sick and the should- be- dead. There seemed to her no way to tell the events of last night, though she wanted tell someone. It seemed to her that the telling, right down to the part where she got sick was the only way to make it real, a thing happened in the past and complete.

Google pointed her in several directions as she searched to see what commercial apple farmers used to reap large harvests. Surely they must use something large and automatic to pick all those apples she thought. Lying across her bed she imagined all of those little black faces and prepubescent black hands picking apples until their palms scabbed over and their shoulders

impinged. The deformities made them an unsightly neglected subclass that begged for legislation. But in her mind's eye no one noticed their overly large shoulders and their grown man hands. The phone rang and she returned to her home from Washington State.

"Yeah."

"Jesus, Savannah, what kind of way is that to answer the phone."

"Hey, Frank." she said flatly.

"Are you all right? You sound tired."

Her husband never could read her voice correctly. "I'm disturbed."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I'm disturbed. I saw something very disturbing."

"You'll be fine. You always are. Just work on the deep breathing and find something that takes your mind off the spaces, whichever ones seem to be off today. Hey, I brought that Dutch apple pie you like so much from Kroger yesterday. You should have a piece for breakfast. You should treat yourself to a piece of that pie."

As she hung up her husband was asking her if she had retrieved his watch.

The beautiful day had gone by unnoticed by Savannah who stayed in the house for its entirety. The internet news tickers as she tried to navigate her way back to the Hoodwinked people told her about the Jamaican Devil Wort that was invading Florida's orange groves forcing the makers of orange juice, oranges and the financial copycat orange drink makers to raise prices. The newscasters had made it sound like the second coming. The Devil was in the orange grove and the complexities of odd late summer once again pressed themselves into Savannah's consciousness.

She waited up at day's end until her child, once more, arrived safely in the house. Jonathon finished a scrimmage game and came directly home. Frank, upset that his watch still rested behind the Sony, went to bed early. A moth flew into the house as Jonathon held the screen door open to exchange goodbyes with the friends who dropped him off. Savannah flew into a panic, drawing the attention of Frank, Jonathon and Jill. They laughed at her as they fanned frantically along with her. The set up a perimeter and forced the bug back out into the sweet air. That night she dreamed of shopping and just before she got to the fresh produce she managed to wake herself up from behind the screen inside of her dream. She had taken the yellow rubber band from around the rapidly growing broccoli and shot it at herself just as the

headless stock boy approached her, his oversized jeans now adequately filled by his bloating, black body.

Savannah sat bolt upright in bed. Frank turned over and the smell of fruit, tangible in its pungency climbed the stairs quietly. It hobbled into the room on short but growing legs and wrapped itself firmly around her chest. The cicadas droned and the house was silent except for the sound of growing.

“Frank, do you smell something?”

He groaned, passed gas and said, “I put the pie in the oven. Did you forget to take it out?”

Leaping from the bed, Savannah ran to the oven as if the pie were on fire. She pulled open the oven door to find nothing there. Someone had taken the pie out. It was already cool. Savannah climbed the steps, entered the room of her child and best friend, closed the windows completely and quietly, intent on not interrupting their sleep. She stood nervously in the hallways outside their bedrooms waiting to see if the smell went away. When it didn't she scurried back downstairs and rifled through the vegetable crisper. The basket on the floor of the pantry held no fruit. She found a bag of apples high on the top shelf of the pantry. Afraid that her family might find them, she carried them carefully to the garbage cans on the side of the house, removed each one from the bag and threw them into the cans one at a time while smiling pleasantly. Savannah was pleased to know that her rapidly ripening child stood no chance of being bruised by the smell. She slammed the lid back onto the can, narrowly preventing a fly from slipping in after them.

She returned to the house to find the air still heavy laden with the smell. She looked for newly opened apple candles, apple soap in sink dispensers and finding none of these items believed herself to be going crazy, victim to the indelible frutiness of a picked off man. But, as she moved to her back porch, trying to keep the world from slowing down as it had the night before, she noticed, as if for the very first time, the apple tree in her neighbor's yard and the three young men shaking it as if their very lives depended on it. She grabbed her broom and ran at them furiously, screaming like a banshee and intent on preventing them from picking apples that had not fallen. Tramping the grass under foot she continued to chase them even after they ran away.

“Savannah,” Jill called from the patio returning her friend back to her home, herself.

Savannah looked down at her disheveled nightgown and began to right it as Jill approached and took the broom from her friend's hands. They walked arm in arm back toward the dark and quiet house, appearing as two slight apparitions, dark skin in white gowns floating on soft grass.

Nightgowns and apples: the oddities of late summer continued.

Episode Three - Home is not always a good place to be at

When Frank came down for breakfast, he found his wife and her houseguest sitting at the kitchen table, on the same side, reading his newspaper. Breakfast, the smell of which had awakened him sat arranged in orderly fashion; square, circle, square. He reminded himself to tell Jill to stop coddling his wife's disorder. The bacon laid horizontal row over vertical row on a square tray that provided consistent margins on all sides. The biscuits were arranged in a circle on a circular tray next to the bacon. Another square tray held the remaining items. Eggs occupied the upper right quadrant. Egg beaters, Savannah's insistence, lay in the upper left. Waffles were stacked in the two bottom quadrants, divided, Frank was sure, because Belgian Waffles are thicker and one stack would throw off the balance of the tray. Frank wondered how many times his wife had rearranged that tray, how many times Jill had helped her. She refused, in many cases to follow her therapist's instructions. She refused to simply engage her thoughts in something else, to distract herself from the unnecessary consideration of the arrangement of objects. Frank had supported her in the early years of their relationship, carefully placing his car keys when he came home from work, cutting the grass into creative patterns. It was not that he had grown tired of supporting her but his doing so left him conflicted. Love subdued his logic; the logic of the trained professional that instructed him to avoid enabling and the love-logic of the husband who cringed every time that she did in front of unbalanced things and people.

"Jill, if you didn't cook you can stay as long as you want because I can't remember the last time Savannah cooked this much food on an early Saturday morning," Frank said. He moved to the table and kissed his wife on the mouth. He stood eyeing the food and picked up a piece of bacon.

"Not yet. Can you wake Jon for me and have him come set the table?" Savannah asked

"Sure, but you know he isn't going to want to eat this early."

"It won't kill him to pretend he likes us enough to eat with us every now and then, Frank."

"I know. I'm on your side. Just don't get too rankled when he has an attitude. Don't let him get to you. QTIP, Savannah."

Savannah smiled at the remembrance.

"Quit taking it personally," Frank said to Jill. "But keep that under your hat. Jonathon hasn't figured it out yet so it has the dual power of aggravating him while and because it obviously unites us. Sometimes when Savannah is about to combust over some dumb Jon

thing I'll just walk by them and say it. She almost laughs out loud every time and Jon sears. It's hilarious."

"Kind of a shame how you resort to having a bit of fun as a parent, isn't it?" Savannah asked.

If, at that moment Jill had any thoughts about the fun as a parent she could never have again, she didn't say anything. She went to the front door for the paper as Frank followed her to the front of the house to call for Jon.

When Jon emerged in the kitchen he was wearing a face full of sleepiness, teenage aggravation and impatience. The last thing he wanted to do at 8:45 a.m. on a Saturday was hang out with forty-somethings.

Jill reached up and pulled at his ear playfully as she stood from the table. She turned and asked, "Sav, do you have any champagne? Let's have mimosas."

Savannah looked excited at the novelty of alcohol in the morning. "Yeah, in the basement in the wine rack."

"I'll get it," Jill said.

"I'll go with. You don't know the code to unlock it anyway." The two women were almost skipping. Savannah disappeared through the doorframe with her hands on Jill's hips and giggling about what they were getting ready to do.

Frank watched them descend and then turned to Jon who rolled his eyes hard, like an ocular contortionist. He sighed and let his head drop like his stock investments just went down...again. Frank stepped into his son's personal space.

"You've got about sixty eight seconds to get right, right now. I'm going into the basement to detain the ladies. You set the table and you lose the attitude."

Jonathon bristled. His chest rounded out an inch or two and his shoulders raised to add even more height over his father's head but it all receded quickly when the steel in his father's eye hardened in response.

Silently daring him to answer Frank asked, "How do you get to be mad about anything?"

Frank went down to the basement and began to chide the women about their alcoholism. Tyler grumbled to himself about the nature of old people trying to be young but he set the table as he did it. He put the forks on the wrong side; the only vehicle he could think of for his dissatisfaction. He picked up two slices of bacon and altered the arrangement of it on the plate as he did. He shoved the slices into his mouth whole and quickly re-arranged the

bacon back into its lines. As the trio of parents mounted the steps he asked, "Auntie Jill, did you cook?"

"No your mom did. You better not start without us," she said as she crossed back into the kitchen.

Savannah lilted over the threshold behind her saying, "Made the bacon nice and chewy like you like it didn't –." Her voice dropped off abruptly and she stood silently looking at the table. Frank saw the shift in his wife's shoulders and knew something was wrong even though he couldn't see her face. He squeezed his way around her frame still blocking the doorway and saw immediately the table and the spot where his wife's plate should have been.

"What?" Jill asked.

Frank glared at Jonathon.

"Awww, what? What happened? Who did what to whom? Jon, what did you do?" Jill asked.

"Get your mother a plate, Jon," Frank ordered.

Jill cursed under her breath.

Jon looked astonished.

"TIP," Savannah said aloud, looking at the table.

"Ma–"

Savannah went back into the basement and then out to the patio. Jill followed her crying.

She sat down on the rattan couch next to her friend without touching her. Not yet. They sat there in silence until Savannah noticed Jill's tears spilling silently onto her breasts.

"What are you crying about? Jill, I'm not mad at you."

"You should be."

"For what?"

"I'm so jealous of you."

Savannah felt ashamed for considering her unset table placement important. Jill let her tears fall without even trying to stop them. It was one of the few indulgences she could still allow herself.

Before Savannah could apologize for having done nothing wrong, Jill said, "I'm going to slap your boy though. He was wrong for that. They mistreat us because they know we'll always love them Sav. You can take chances when there aren't any boundaries."

Jill pulled her friend's shoulder and head down and into her lap. She rubbed Savannah's hair as the morning matured. When Frank made his way to the patio doors he stopped short upon noticing Savannah's obvious position of comfort. One step forward. One woman sat on the rattan sofa with her hips slid forward to its edge. The other lay draped across and languid atop the cushion with her hair filling the lap of the other. There was no room for him. Several steps back. He shifted his weight a few times before executing a shuffling, hesitant turn to go back up the stairs. Breakfast remained on the table until well after noon.

"What are you doing?"

Frank asked the question as if he couldn't see his wife washing the breakfast dishes, throwing away eggs that had sat out for hours. It was the tone he reserved for his most difficult patients, the one that allowed him to condemn without ever saying so. Savannah moved back and forth between the kitchen sink and the island without ever turning or answering him.

"Jon should be doing this. It's his job."

Savannah exhaled laboriously and kept clanging dishes in her curt, hurt female sort of way.

"Savannah," John said one decibel too loud. He was in full black man of the house mode. Savannah was being lowered a peg and she knew it.

"I'd have him do it Frank," she said turning and propping one soap-dangling right hand on her hip, "but he's not here. He's not here and no, I don't know where he went." Savannah's anxiety and sudden anger rankled causing the evaporating dish soap to fizz. The water she had left running to confront her husband's tone raised to a tenor growl. A wet glass slid across the plate it sat angled on top of in the dish drainer. Through the kitchen echoed a hollow tink.

Jill appeared at the door from the basement and hesitated. She couldn't decide whether to stay in case Savannah needed her or to let the marriage defend itself. Frank waited for Savannah to excuse Jill but in short order realized the moment wouldn't come. He shifted his weight from side to side as he looked back and forth between the two women. Jill's right hand rubbed softly and nervously up and down her leg. Savannah reached over to straighten something on her husband but in approaching realized that nothing about his clothes or his hair or his shoulders was askew. Frank had always been one to stand tall and squared off, the

result of being the son of an independent business man active in the Black Panther movement. He was, per his norm, immaculately situated but something was nevertheless completely off. Savannah's stomach churned in the wake of it.

"Leave the kitchen for whenever Jon comes back. You can't overdo for him Savannah; it doesn't benefit him at all." Frank looked again between the two women in his kitchen then sucked his teeth and went to his bedroom. The air sucked out of the room with him but when Jill stopped holding hers, the room refilled.

1440:10 WonderWoman: Did that. It's downloading now. What is it?

1440:25 StarCarla: It's the program you need to make Hoodwinked work. Won't go without it.

1440:33 WonderWoman: But what is it?

1440:50 StarCarla: Like I know. Just know you have to have it. Done downloading yet?

1440:59 WonderWoman: No, what can I do in meantime?

1441: 03 StarCarla: Wait. Just like your doctor friend. Too fast. Impatient. If it takes me a minute to answer it means Layla walked by or near or something. Will have to leave screen.

1441: 16 WonderWoman: I understand. Keep you eyes out – she's sneaky.

1441:20 StarCarla: Little ninja feet.

1441: 24 WonderWoman: LOL

1441:36 StarCarla: Did you just put that? Becoming a regular techie.

1441:44 WonderWoman: Done.

1441:48 StarCarla: Window asking what you want to do? Install.

1441:52 StarCarla: Then wait. Will say when finished.

Hopefully my back turned completely to this door will let him know that I don't want to talk about it. Come on, Frank. Do your job. Read my signs. For a psychiatrist you are so clueless sometimes. Sit up straighter. Let him know you hear him. Good, slow feet, now you're getting it. That's right, hold it right there. It's not like you're going to go look for my child anyway. You won't let me.

1442:00 StarCarla: done yet?

1442:17 StarCarla: done yet?

1442: 26 WonderWoman: Y. Had my own distraction to look out for.

Reversal. Good, I win.

1442:33 WonderWoman: when should I activate it?

1442:40 StarCarla: as long as you keep it running and the icon is red in the bottom right corner, it will do what it needs to when it needs to do it.

1442:46 WonderWoman: but we don't know what it will do.

1443:01 StarCarla: no. not yet. I think it may have something to do with hacking other sites.

1443:13 WonderWoman: illegal!

1442:20 StarCarla: not in the illegal sort of way.

1442:26 WonderWoman: Other ways!?

1442:29 StarCarla: BBL

Big Beautiful Ladies? BBL?

1442:40 WonderWoman: BBL?

1442: 43 WonderWoman: BBL?

Big Butt Layla? Something Boss Lady?

1443:02 WonderWoman: Carla?

Seems like by now he'd have thought to look for the child. Guess we're waiting on someone to shoot him, too. It's not like he doesn't know that people shoot each other. Jill's right up in here with that terminal absence sitting out front. BBL? I know he knows more about computers than he's telling me. Just doesn't want to help his own mother. Is he thinner? Why would Jon be losing weight? He used to eat me out of house and home and now I have to coax him to the dinner table. But why I work so hard at that I don't know. Just so he can refuse to set me a place at the table. Ungrateful little bastard. All I do around here. Lunch packing, school meetings. What in the world makes him think I like going to sit in front of four or five white men and women to try and explain why my child skipped school...twice. Or why he thinks he can just not put his phone away when the English teacher tells him too. I traded phones with Squeeze. Right. I need to go up there and see who this Squeeze is anyway. Who just trades out their nice phone for your old basic one? Unh, Unh, something's not right. Crap. Something's not right. What's too soon to ask about a dead child's habits? BBL? What the hell does that mean? Trying to be cute with LOL, now Carla thinks I'm better than I am on this damn thing.

"Jill?" Savannah yelled.

"Jill?" She yelled louder.

Footsteps moved above her head. They were too heavy for Jill's and coming from the wrong end of the house. She realized she had awakened the sleeping dog. The dog was not approaching with his restrained anger walk, he had donned his pert teenager shoes. Savannah

pictured his big brown feet in tapestry ballerina flats, fuschia and festooned in flowers all over the toe. She kept her half smile turned to the computer, his computer in his office.

"Jill isn't here. And could you please, please use the intercom. We agreed we wouldn't yell all over the house. It's uncivilized, Sav."

Jill kept typing on the computer. BBL over and over again.

"It wasn't uncivilized in our first house. The laundry chute worked just fine for communication then."

"We weren't civilized in our first house. You were running around panting behind every crooked line, each and every tilted label on canned goods. I was trying to start my own practice and ignoring everybody including myself. Between your twenty-four hour shifts and my business Jon was staying with relatives more than with us. The yelling just adds stress to this house."

"Don't forget here you came from, Frank."

“Don’t forget how far you’ve come, Savannah. It’s okay to be okay. And despite what you think, Jonathan will be okay.

Jill said nothing, she didn't turn around. BBL over and over again.

“Don’t yell around the house. I don’t like it”, Frank said. His ballerina slippers clipped away.

1506:01 Wonderwoman: BBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBLBBL
BBL
BBL
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1520:03 Star Carla: Okay, just hit me back when you get free. Layla's got three traumas right now, so she won't be by checking up.

1520:15 Wonderwoman: No, I'm here, what the heck is BBL?

1520:25 **Star Carla:** Be back later. I assumed your BBL message meant it would be a while.

1520:36 Wonderwoman: so now what? Got a greasemonkey and can't even play with him.

1520:41 **StarCarla:** I've got some codes you can try in the address line. Haven't tried them myself so if they work let me know asap. The change the page codes from time to time so if yours works I'll need to try before they expire.

1520:44 **Wonderwoman:** Email them to me though. So I won't lose them in this IM screen. Is there any way to save this IM convo?

1520:55 StarCarla: Girl, I don't know. I can't think of any convo I've had on IM that I need to save.

1520:58 Wonderwoman: true

1600:04 StarCarla: will send. Peace.

1600:17 Wonderwoman: later.

When Savannah heard the key in the lock she got up from the movie she was pretending to watch and moved to the foyer. Jon would have used the garage door key pad. Jill used the front door. Her heart hoped against all evidence that Jill was not at her front door. The shadow thrown against the door's sidelights, thanks to the porch lights she'd turned on hours ago at dusk, was small and feminine. Savannah turned from the door crestfallen. An eleven o'clock kind of fall darkness had descended. It was a kind of dark that Jon had never seen without permission and she struggled to avoid thinking about how he might be handling it, how it might be handling him.

"Savannah."

The sound of her name from Jill's lips was bright around the edges. Savannah turned around to see her son, tall and brown but slumping behind Jill. Savannah smiled and started toward him but didn't make it more than two steps before the unmistakable feeling of hyperventilation began with a ferocity she had never known before. Her house smelled like a giant baked apple and Savannah's eyes darted around her large foyer looking for its source. She searched the other faces to see if they smelled it. In an instant her heart began to thump wildly in her chest. Had she wanted to count the beats she might not have been able to. They followed each other, systole on diastole, systole on diastole. Her blood was running for an exit. Her pupils dilated. Her eyes widened. She looked, she was sure, like the asthma patients she treated in the field. She could feel the panicked look that came with all the air that you could not use.

Jill looked for something to straighten or adjust on Jonathon. She quickly scoured his body from head to toe and found nothing. Jonathon made a slow attempt to examine himself but abandoned the search for a confused stare at his mother.

Savannah tried to order him to his room. With all her might she tried to will a strong directive from her mouth but her breath would not allow her. She leaned forward to get her head lower, to keep from passing out in front of her son. One flopping arm thrusting itself in

an upward arcing motion and an extended and extremely straight finger said what she couldn't. She closed her eyes and then, strictly for effect, opened them slowly, menacingly. Jonathan climbed the stairs pulling himself up using the banister, one stair at a time. Jill stepped toward Savannah as her friend crumpled partly into her hands and partly to the floor.

"Frank!" Jill screamed.

Frank startled to the hallway at the top of the steps and without ever seeing Jill or his wife knew something was wrong. He looked down the hall to his son's room and decided to check on his wife first. He could always kill his son tomorrow while she was at work.

Frank hadn't seen Savannah that far into an anxiety attack for years. She had, for the most part learned to deal with her asymmetriphobia. She hadn't been on medicine for it since after Jonathon was born. Except for some isolated outbreaks over the years; Christmas hosted for the family and members of his practice, Jon's first pee-wee football game, the day after Tyler's funeral, she had done fine.

Holding his wife in his arms on the floor, Frank began to breathe deeply. He moved around so that his chest was to her back and he inhaled and exhaled with purposeful movement. He threaded a hand further around her waist and lowered it to the inside of her thigh where he polished softly. He moved the other hand up to the rise of her breast and positioned the skin of his face next to hers. Savannah took up the rhythm of his breathing and as it slowed, she started to cry. Her breath took on a new elevated cadence. Jill had long ago left the foyer.

Savannah rolled silently out of her husbands' arms and silenced the alarm clock. She reached to the floor beside her bed and picked up the pile of uniform clothes, shoes and underwear she had placed the night before. As she headed for the bathroom she heard Frank turn over.

"You don't have to dress in the bathroom. I've got to get up anyway." He turned on the lamp on his side of the bed illuminating his wife's naked body. "Hey now," he said.

"Hey now, nothing. I've gotta go to work. What are you getting up for so early on a Saturday morning?"

"Fatherhood calls. He was high last night, Savannah. You know he was high, right?"

"Jonathan? Oh, Frank, I don't think so. Jon wouldn't do drugs. We've talked about it too much. As many stories as he's heard me tell about overdoses and murders behind the stuff? No, I don't think so."

Frank stared at his wife with a face empty of emotion. It told Savannah that his announcement was not emotional, not a contest about parenting. It was not his analyst's face but it spoke factually. Savannah looked slightly angry but with whom Frank could not tell.

"I'm having him tested today."

"Be a father, Frank," Savannah said pulling on her uniform pants. "Be a father."

Savannah left the bedroom for work without kissing him. Frank sat up in bed with his hands crossed in his lap.

Engine 28 crept up on Constitution Avenue as the police got out of their cars. There were ten of them there to secure the scene. The police signaled for them to come down while they pushed all of the night workers out of the way; back into nearby alleys, down to the corner. Savannah grabbed equipment and entered the breezeway behind the cop. Climbing three flights of stairs with all of her gear and wearing a bullet proof vest under her sweatshirt, she couldn't help but wonder why all criminals and foul living people didn't just get apartments on the first floor. She thought that people who knew they were prone to death could at least make it easy on the folks their screaming parents and distraught baby's mamas had to call on to save their tired asses.

There he was, Savannah and Engine 28's latest soon- to -be- dead guy, lying on his girl's floor just inside the door. Per the norm, he had a wound through his palm and he was wedged next to the door. They always tried to shield and they always fell down where there wasn't enough room to work on them. Savannah noticed a young female child standing next to the expiring man's screaming baby's mama. The youthful sheen of her eyes betrayed the calm way that she looked at the fast- growing- cold corpse. The breasts riding high there were too round for her twelve- year- old face. Her outfit cried hooker while her demeanor; she stood with one foot atop the other, one hand in what Savannah assumed was her mother's and the thumb of the other in her mouth, broadcast saint. The man lying wedged behind the door, once Savannah's captain turned him over, looked younger than Jonathon. Breath bated for Savannah.

They pulled him further into the apartment while the police closed the slut-saint and other traumatized children into one of the bedrooms. Screaming baby's mama was giving some incoherent retelling of events for the police over in the corner of the room. The other roughneck started using his gloved hand to plug up the hole in the side of the boys chest wall and Savannah began to set up so that she could shove a breathing tube down soon-to-be-deceased thug's throat so he could breathe. The roaches were respectful of their attempts. They crawled out of the little bitty area where Savannah would have to strategically lie in order to pump air into his lungs for him. Laying there, her chest on the dirty floor, she began to go through the motions, a requiem for the unjust and deserving. But, then she noticed the small and scattered pools of blood just off her elbow. They didn't fit. Savannah tried to focus on the laryngoscope handle and blade to stave off the panting. She slid the mechanism into his mouth and torqued up on the handle to lift his mouth and throat open. The small hole she peered into

gaped entirely too large in front of her. It begged to be filled with air and as one of the other roughnecks did CPR an occasional waft of acrid air would passively fizzle back at her.

The blood on the floor that was then traveling away from her elbow in rivulets belonged in there, beyond the narrow passageway she was looking into. The size of the blood on the floor taunted her, threatened to never fit through her hole or the one her co-workers were making with the IV in his arm. Savannah studied the hands of her co-worker starting the IV. They were bigger than Savannah's, larger than the IV through which the hospital would replace the blood that kept coming out of the hole under his arm. She grew hotter and hotter. The pulsations of air from his throat made her queasy. She couldn't quit looking at the squares, circles and squiggles of blood on the floor, on the wall.

Baby's Mama began to scream about how white people weren't trying to save a young black man. Savannah guessed she hadn't realized that three of the four of them on the company that day happened to be black. The phone kept ringing as the oh -so -surprised friends and relatives called to see what had happened. The news of death and destruction had traveled with amazing speed. Savannah sucked her teeth, angry that the young woman's willingness to do absolutely nothing about his illicit lifestyle had suddenly made his not so unexpected death Savannah's emergency. She would have said something had it not been for the unceasing sense of dread that was trying to consume her. Savannah tried to follow Frank's advice, the advice that has carried her through nearly two decades of firefighting. "Think about something else," she reminded herself. Her captain looked at her lying there with her hands perched over the man's mouth and her chest heaving against the floor.

"If you can't see vocal cords, Savannah, let's get him some oxygen for a minute."

Savannah didn't move or blink. Her captain stopped CPR for a beat and slapped her on her shoulder hard. She slid backwards and let the other roughneck in with the oxygen bag.

More police were arriving downstairs on the street. There were the angry voices raising themselves in protest on the street below. They sounded close. The angry voices seemed to be met with other angry voices. People were trying to climb the steps. The police were holding them away. People were trying to go down the steps. Savannah could not tell where those people had come from. She was having trouble concentrating and fumbled with the arc of her tube in order to distract from the sound of her own breath and pulse in her ear. She reached down to get a stylette and kneeling there, forcing it into her breathing tube to change the degree of its arc, her heel slipped in the slick red-brown blood of the dead black teenager

tossing her behind squarely down into it. She raised her hands to shoulder level and looked down through her legs at the blood on her butt. She studied the young man's face and then dollied back to the blood. It was then that the images self-corrected. She thought, barely avoiding saying it aloud, that the blood on her butt should be inside the boy. "You should be in there."

Her mind's eye took its cursor, single clicked on it, raised it up from the floor and using a rapid drag and drop she visually placed it on top of the boy's body. This, for her pulse was a wonderful start. She took several deep breaths and moved back into position at the boy's head. Using her knee she signaled for the roughneck with the oxygen bag to step aside. The boy's blood was seeping back into his veins through his clothes. Savannah's respiratory rate began to slow. Trying to further distract herself by listening to the police officer's noisy radio she heard the traffic of what was developing outside. They requested more officers. Baby's mama finally answered the ringing phone and recounted Savannah's lack of steadfast and earnest work on her gallant man. The tension was becoming tangible.

Her captain noted their co-worker's success with the IV when he asked Savannah "How is our tube looking?"

She lay on her chest again to peruse his throat. She pulled up hard on the handle once more and as his throat, near the vocal cords, momentarily spread wide, pinkish fluid ran in and covered her landmark. "Into a mouth full of fluid is how it's looking. Can I get the suction?"

She drained his throat as she recovered her center. His blood was all but back in his body. The rescue unit had arrived to transport him, but they were having trouble getting through the crowd down on the street. Most people in Savannah's response area discounted the value of an early and regular bedtime, slut-saint included, so Savannah pictured them as straight lines down the middle of square mattresses. She pictured Jon's line floating above his mattress and shook the image out of her head.

She shoved the lever of her tool down into his throat further and pulled up with as much force as she could.

With things becoming less and less incongruous by the second she realized that she was really beginning to loathe this boy for making her work this hard because he had chosen to be ignorant. She hated him for looking like Tyler. She suspected him of killing Tyler. She detested him for tempting Jonathon.

"You want me to take a look?" her Captain asked.

Answering him but looking into the boy's throat she answered, "No, I'll get it."

"A fresh pair of eyes might help"

"I said I'll get it! I'll get it."

Just as quickly as the room's shapes autocorrected, --she watched him morph into a vehemoth, dangerous and salivating and wild. She began to think about all of the good that could come from this kid dying. Baby's Mama might actually get a job after his drug money stopped coming in to support her household. She might meet a real guy on that job and stop subjecting her kids to this kind of life. Taxpayer money wouldn't have to pick up his tab at the rehabilitation hospital. They wouldn't have to make anymore runs to pick him up due to complications after the gun shot wound. His attacker might stay free long enough to take a couple more of these losers off their hands before getting tagged out himself. There would be one less drug dealer on the street; one less ignorant fool to tempt her son into a life of destruction later. Savannah returned to looking at his vocal cords. They were before her clearly, the fleshy protuberances making a V-shape just waiting for her to slide the breathing tube through.

"Hey girl, what about the tube?"

The IV was in and running. Soon to be dead guy's heart beat on the monitor had slowed to cadence that clip clopped evenly with the beating of her own heart.

"Is my daddy dead yet?"

The question came into her consciousness over her right shoulder. The saint-slut stood flatfooted and unflinching between the Captain's body and Savannah's at the head of the soon --to- be- dead guy. Peering up at the little girl, Savannah's assymetriphobia again autocorrected itself. Her retinal nerve returned her father's image superimposed evenly around the child's body until they almost melded into one vision.

The blaring television fell mute. Baby's mama's lips moved frantically next to the phone's receiver, but her voice was absent.

"Do you want him to be?" Savannah asked without looking directly at the child-man.

"No," she answered.

"Jesus" Savannah mumbled.

The tube slipped right in.

To Do November 15

Kick Jon's narrow behind several times.¹

Tell Jill she can't stay anymore.

Help Jill find a man

Kick Jon's narrow tail square(evening)²

Call mom to whine

Remind mom not to say anything to Sav about my whining

Champagne for Mimosa's when Sav gets home

Rent Jill a room for the weekend.

¹ c'mon, really...what would you do? Doesn't he deserve it?

² Besides, black families grow up on whippings. It's not abuse for us. You shine out, you get struck. Period.

okay,

it's not that I'm trying to take away or otherwise usurp your creative control but so much can get lost between the page and the stage, between the author and the actors. The actors make all the difference and the ones you've chosen are good, they really are. But let's not pretend as if they don't get some direction from the play as the author intended it. What if the actors don't know Frank and Len and Jill and Savannah like I do? I've taken the liberty to sort of annotate the play. Just so you know how I saw it. It's not a directive, not even a road map really. More like a topographical map. You still control the way to get there. I trust you with that. You'll play your part well, I know that. But I am, honestly, worried about these people that I love so much. Thanks for understanding.

Episode Three – Not Seen 1

An alarm clock sounds in the distance off stage. At center stage Frank is rearranging the basement furniture. The marble top coffee table has been moved flat against the wall. The big screen television has been rotated so that its screen is only inches off the wall it now faces.. The eggplant leather sofa and loveseat have been pushed to the opposite far corners of the basement. The pool table, too heavy to move, has the floor cushions that normally sit on the sofa attached to each corner with the bungee cords that Frank normally keeps in the trunk of his car for emergencies. The two end tables are missing and the imprint of their legs in the carpet proves that they have been moved somewhere completely out of sight. Frank has on a grey sweatsuit that he hasn't worn since he started his own practice. The sleeves of it are bunched up around his elbows. He is wearing the gym shoes he uses to cut the lawn. He looks disheveled and dirty, a state uncommon for him. When he hears the alarm clock off stage, he checks the clock and begins to time his son's appearance in the basement. Anything over about 7 minutes and he will beat him for that too. John enters the scene from stage left, appearing and coming to a stop at the bottom of the stairs.

Note says: conversation necessary, clock set. When you hear it, hustle downstairs immediately. Non compliance is dangerous for you... The silence makes Jon uncomfortable. He can tell something is up, that his dad's demeanor is odd.

Frank You saw my note I take it?

Jon It was on the ceiling and the clock I had to turn off, I couldn't exactly miss it, Dad.

Frank Good, that was indeed the point.

The two men stand looking at each other in silence. John shifts his feet uncomfortably as he scans the room in rotation wrinkling his brow. He shoves his hands into his pajama shorts

Jon What's with the furniture?

Frank *(he motions with a slight nod of his head and his son recognizes it as a request to come closer. Jon moves sleepily into the center of the room)* I want to talk to you, son.

Savannah require this slippers and the requirement can be heard in the way Jon wears them... Jon's face is more miffed than confused.)

The speech about the danger of drugs and alcohol is one he's heard many times. He isn't in the mood to hear his father overreact. the monotony of his father's speeches, his dad's canned psychological approach to all things paternal. It is because he has such resolve to face the music that he is able to see his father's fist approaching. His head moves toward the sky and though he knows he is not happy about anything, he cannot stop the odd up-looking. He senses his feet losing contact with the ground and for one split second he thinks he feels like those odd-screaming women in church who cry and laugh and jump all at the same time.

Jon *(still shifting his feet sleepily, his slippers make an odd shoop, shoop sound on the carpet that he moves across without lifting his feet.)* Have you been working on the car or something? *(Jon asks this while taking his father in from top to bottom.*

Frank. I don't want you to get hurt.

Jon lowers his head and sighs. He opens his eyes before lifting his head once more to face his father. Frank swings his arm.

Jon's head rises before he stumbles back and falls down on the floor. Jon manages to amble back to his feet. Jon's face is one of sheer amazement.

Jon. Dad?

Frank swings his arm again. Jon wraps his arms around his midsection as he bends at the waist in an involuntary fashion.

As the clarity of this one moment in existence comes back to him he becomes more and more amazed at what has happened.) Jon gets the same feeling of weightlessness, not-quite-estasy. His belly is warm with something he can't name. He wraps his hands across his bare torso. In trying to straighten up, he realizes quickly that to remain bent over feels much better. He feels the need to reverence this warmth.)

Frank. *(setting his jaw firm)* You misunderstood me, son. I didn't want you to hurt yourself when you fell.

Jon. This is about the weed isn't it?

Frank. And, it seems, you haven't gone crazy after all. Of course it's about the marijuana.

(Frank swings again on his son, this time hitting him with an open hand on his bare chest. The imprint of Frank's palms sings red and immediate.) We...You don't do drugs. We don't break the law in this house and we don't risk addiction. You are not a criminal no matter how many

Frank can tell that his son is thinking about his grandmother the surgeon and his grandfather the insurance agent. Before Jon ever mentions them. Jon is thinking, Frank knows, about all the poverty that he believes his father has never seen. The smirk is there because Jon thinks his father is what Jon and his friends would call soft.

Frank has lost even his desire to be rational and feels oddly proud that he can still get down despite his degrees

of the people you want to be friends with are. We did not scrape our way out of bad neighborhoods and poverty to watch you go back there.

(A contemptuous smirk rolls across Jon's face)

Jon. Grandma's a surgeon. Grandpa's in insurance.

Frank. You dumb, naïve bastard. You're a young dummy trying to be a punk. *(He opens up a three piece combo on his son and smiles slightly afterward. Jon is now looking very closely at his father, albeit through tears.)*

Jon. Dad?

Frank. Don't let the suits fool you, Jon. I love you more than I love myself or your mother and I will, because I love you that much, beat you daily in order to make sure you live. Any punk can die, Jon. The mark of a man is to stand and live. Black men run daily. We've been running for centuries, for a host of reasons; some beneficial, some detrimental. Smoke some shit again and see what happens.

(Frank moves to the table against the wall. He picks up the telephone and carries it to the floor beside his kneeling, crumpled son.) Now, you can call Child Protective Services if you want. But

if they come and arrest me, please believe I'll lower your shade again when your momma pays my bail.

Frank exits up the stairs and off stage.

To Do November 15th

~~Kick Jon's narrow behind several times.~~¹

Tell Jill she can't stay anymore

Help Jill find a man

Kick Jon's narrow tail square (evening)²

Call mom to whine

Remind mom not to say anything to Sav about my whining

Champagne for Mimosa's when Sav gets home

Rent Jill a room for the weekend.

¹ c'mon, really...what would you do? Doesn't he deserve it?

² Besides, black families grow up on whippings. It's not abuse for us. You shine out, you get struck. Period.

Episode Three, Not Seen Two

Frank realizes that he has never seen his wife's friend look this way before. Frank feels himself softening in the wake of her fish pants and pokes his chest out to remind himself that Jill is on borrowed time in his house.

The softness of this crumpling, of her inability is strange to Frank. It feels sensuous to him and for after a quick moment he recognizes it and is ashamed. He is unfamiliar with this type of woman, Savannah has often told him so. In the back of his mind he is wondering how he'll manage to keep this further proof of Sav's assertion from getting back to her. Frank is really hoping that she doesn't start to weep and when Jill does, his face indicates that he is now fully frightened by this woman's proximity.

Frank is really uncomfortable and is caught off guard by this reaction in a woman.

Frank enters through the stairs from the basement and immediately notices Jill in the living room against the far wall. She is standing there as if she has been forced into that space against the wall, just offset from the corner of the room by something. She is wearing blue flannel pajamas with yellow and white fish on the pants. An untied lemon yellow robe hangs over them. Her hair is in two ponytails on either side of her head.

Frank. I'm glad you're up.

(Jill begins to look a bit unsteady on her feet. She reaches a hand out as if to grab hold of something that should be in front of her but isn't. Frank starts toward her and then stops.)

Jill. They found Tyler's murderer. *(Frank sits down on the couch he is now standing next to.)* He just walked into the police station with his grandmother and said that he killed my son. Just walked in and said that he killed him.

Frank. You should sit down. *(Frank rises from the couch as Jill's legs begin to visibly wobble and she crumples to the floor. Frank furrows his brow in confusion)* Jill, *(walking toward her)* let me help you

Frank. *(leads Jill back to the couch he has just left.)* How are you feeling about this? *(Jill doesn't answer. She stares at Frank as if he has said something in a language she doesn't*

understand) How does this make you feel? Are you relieved?

Jill. Maybe.

Frank Well, it's not wrong to be relieved. Tyler was important to you. You've had all this empty space in your life since last spring and now, this at least begins to fill it.

Jill continues to stare at Frank without saying anything. Frank begins to shift from side to side nervously.

Frank. Okay.

Jill I should eat something. Should I?

Frank I'm not sure that you should eat if you're eating because you feel distressed. Are you distressed or hungry? It's not good to eat emotionally, but if you're hungry then you should maybe eat something.

*Picture a kid just caught in
a bad lie by his parents.
This withering is really
confusing a normally
composed man*

Jill Do you think he shot Ty as Ty cried for me?
*(Frank makes guttural grunting noises and flailing hand
gestures. Jill's eyes are growing moist and her rib cage is
pulling toward her spine. He offers Jill a box of tissues. Jill
never accepts the box of tissues and Frank sits them on the
couch next to her. Frank's facial expression turns to fright. As
he turns around to leave the living room, looking over his
shoulder at Jill, he notices Jon standing behind him.)*

Jon Is she crying? *(whispering and peering over his father's shoulder. Frank grabs Jon's arm
and turns his son's back to Jill)* Are we just going to leave her there?

Frank *(flailing and grunting and whispering)* Ahhh, Shhh, Uhhh...

Jon. We gotta do something. We should call mom. Dad,*(as Frank exits the room go
upstairs)* can we just leave her there on the floor?

Their voices trail off as both men leave Jill in the living room.

To Do November 15th

~~Kick Jon square in the ass several times.~~

~~Tell Jill she can't stay anymore~~

~~Help Jill find a man~~

Kick Jon square in the ass (evening)²

Call mom to whine

Remind mom not to say anything to Sav about my whining

Champagne for Mimosa's when Sav gets home

Rent Jill a room for the weekend.

¹ c'mon, really...what would you do? Doesn't he deserve it?

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Episode Three- Scene Two

"Why are you whispering? Where's Jon?"

"Why are you two whispering? Why are you both on here? What's wrong?"

"So you guys just left her there? Of course she lost it, what else was she going to do?"

"Even if you've never seen her like that you do realize that people cry right? There is this whole concept called emotion and sometimes, when bad things happen people actually cry."

"You're grown men, what do you mean you didn't know what to do?"

"I'm not discounting the fact that she's my friend but you could've at least gotten her off the floor. Christ, you guys act like it's the first time you've seen a woman cry. I've cried."

"Yes, I have."

"Different how, Jon?"

"Well is she still crying now?"

"What does that mean, Frank? Well find out. If she's still there crying."

"Jon, you stay on the line while your father goes and checks."

"I don't cry like Jill does? One of you is going to have to explain that when I get home. Seriously? What is crying seriously?"

What?

"Stop whispering, I can't hear you."

"Let me talk to your dad on the phone, Jon."

"Great Ceasar's ghost, Frank just go down there, pick her up off the floor and put her somewhere off the floor. Can you give her something, a sedative?"

"You've got a wife that's prone to panic attacks and you don't keep anything on hand?"

"Oh, So now I don't really have a problem. Right. Crap, we're getting a run. I'm coming home after I'm done. Get her off the floor, Frank. Send Jon if you think it'll help. I gotta go."

Frank in a dirty sweatsuit took me a few seconds to adjust to. But, in an instant I knew. Jon and Frank had interacted. I didn't know exactly how, but much like a few days prior, with the gun shot wound, I just knew. It suddenly and clearly came to me. Jon's image and Frank's seem to just waft over one another and make sense. I decided to trust it. I had not felt a level of contempt for my family before. And so, as they scampered out from corners like field mice when I drove up to the house and got out of my car, I was surprised by not only the presence of contempt but it's pronouncement. It was so strong, although momentary, that I almost vomited. A wave of nausea so intense swept my gut that I really thought that I would throw up through snarling teeth. It wasn't panic. I knew that. There was nothing to arrange with this one. There wasn't even one fluttering heartbeat. Layla's emergence in the front hall kept it at bay.

"Hey, girl," I said with a look that invited her to tell me how she got invested in the matter.

"Jon, paged me. At first I thought he was a trauma coming in from another county but I was only momentarily relieved to find out it was him."

"How is she?"

"Hell, her son's dead and they just found the degenerate that did it. She's terrible. Wouldn't you be?"

"No. Not according to my family," I said turning around to give them a special glare as we all mounted the stairs. They were following Layla and me up like ducklings heading for water. The full grown psychiatrist and the would-be thug. I swung the door shut behind Layla and me as we entered. I was in no danger of hitting the men with it since they had stopped in the hallway before ever reaching Jill's door. In their minds, I thought, Layla and I were the old priest and the young priest. What lay on the other side of the door to our extra bedroom was apparently beyond their ability to conquer. Jill sat up when we entered. The collar of her nightgown looked like she'd been jogging.

"It still doesn't bring my boy back."

"Nothing will," I said.

"He'll pay though. Trust me, Jill, they always do," Layla said.

We both sat down on either side of her. I held Jill's hand and Layla rubbed her back. We sat quietly listening to Jill's tears. We didn't attempt to wipe her dripping nose. I kissed her cheek and reached over to squeeze Layla's hand too. Between falling tear drops Jill would look

up at us and press her lips together in a plaintive smile. To us it said, I need some more time and we gave it to her. I put my cheek next to hers prepared to kiss it as many times as necessary. Layla rubbed her back and her bicep and her leg just above her knee. I heard the shoop shoop of my son's slippers approach the door and knew that our prolonged silence and Jill's continued crying were more interesting than sad to him. Frank, I was sure, had dispatched him to investigate. Jill was, for them, a woman in a way that I simply was not. I cried and Jill never knew how selfish my tears were. I wanted to wither. I could wither. Judging though from the men in my life, drooping petals would make me the Hottentot Venus, a thing to peeped at and tittered about. A creature precious enough to gaze at adoringly. A creature not precious enough to risk actually holding. I imagined myself never being touched again. What if they never looked directly at me again? What if, withering was a condition you couldn't come to late? I swallowed and closed my eyes until the tears dried up.

Episode Three – Scene Three

Car rides have always been enjoyable for me. Inside of a small space it feels much easier to reconcile shapes, sizes and sounds. What is overwhelming you simply block out by turning to face the other side of the car. When driving, you concentrate on the road and thus the voices of people talking to you become accompaniment that floats to you from a space that you really can't see. The conversation of passengers often moves with the landscape. Beautiful things outside the encapsulated existence inside the car cause their sentences to float off into unfinished nothingness. Curvy, mountainous driving makes conversation more excited. I suppose that everyone in the car is heightened a bit by the challenge of runaway truck ramps and shoulder markings that sometimes appear headlong and desperate as they rise into visibility ahead of you, a few feet at a time. You know you should probably slow down. You've been taught to avoid overdriving your headlights but, as it is with all road trips, you are anxious to arrive, most of the time, and the curves seem to be inviting you to challenge them. The conversation is a staccato tune that reveals itself through quarter and half rests that punctuate the physical press of each curve.

Layla, Jill and I felt like we were in college again. We listened to our favorite road songs, this time without having to constantly change CD's because Jill had downloaded all of our most loved ones into her MP3 player. Were it not for the fact that we were going to face Tyler's murderer the trip would have been perfect. It was actually. Until we had those awkward moments of remembrance when Jill would grow quiet and we noticed the absence of her voice in the cacophony of our music; our giggling and the rhythm of tires on sometimes smooth pavement. This, to me, seemed like a tremendous conundrum. You feel guilty for not remembering, for not always being irate about the loss and saddened by the tangibility of it. You can't get on with the work of living while holding on to the loss. Each time I thought about it I would glance at her and wonder how she was managing to even sit erect, to hold her eyes open and take in the sights that her boy would never see.

White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia was the midpoint between Hampton and Cincinnati. It was also the site of several confessionals while Jill was in college there. After our first year of college in two different places I decided to drive back with her after an all too brief summer visit. We stopped in at Biscuitville, the place we've been eating in ever since on this trip, and Jill told me she thought she might be pregnant. She wasn't, but if it hadn't been for

me she might not have checked until it was too late to do anything about it. It was then that we learned that a truck stop has something for every stage of one's reproductive life. They had warming jellies and mood music for foreplay. They had condoms and creams for protection. They had pregnancy tests just in case category one had worked too well and category two not well enough. Layla had been to Biscuitville a few times herself in college as she and I had for four years of undergraduate school at Indiana University traveled to Hampton for each spring break. Black tenderoni's, the beach and a free stay with Jill near an historically black university made it a no brainer. We would revel in the opportunity with juvenile witticisms which we, sad to say, still used. "There's nothing like an historically black brother." "Let's put on a bikini and make some black college history." "Thank you, Jim Crow"

When we pulled in to Biscuitville, Layla, who couldn't believe it was still there slid into her psychiatrist identity and shot the white elephant dead before we could have any fun at all ignoring him in the warm glow of our fond memories. "Jill, you can't not want to shoot this kid on sight."

I closed my eyes and turned up one side of my mouth, amazed still by the way that Layla could just declare things. Her philosophy had long been one that asserted the power of avowal. Some things, in her world just needed to be said; without pretty packaging, without prep work. "How did she die?" patients would ask. "You killed her when you let her have three forty ounces and then waved at her when she pulled off from the club in her car," Layla would answer. People often needed a few minutes to marinate on things with the good doctor.

Jill smirked and said, "I don't know, it's weird. I can't help but wonder how Ty would want me to feel and I feel terrible about the fact that I don't really know. There was apparently a lot I didn't know about the life Tyler as living. I knew he had been doing some dirt but I would have never guessed it would be to the point or degree that someone would kill him."

"Maybe it wasn't to that degree. Maybe Ty just ended up somewhere that he really never would have," I said.

Layla ignored the glare I shot her since I knew full well what was coming next. "I don't know, Jilly. People just don't get shot and killed for no reason. Not normally. A full 98 percent of people coming through the door of the ER got shot because they were doing something that folk get shot for."

"Layla, could we please be solution oriented, here," I said.

"No, no, it is," Jill said. "I feel like it's going to be important to ask this kid about Tyler. I want to know why he shot him and what they were doing when the whole thing happened. The fact of the matter is that I think I always knew that Tyler was doing dirt to that degree. I'm wondering now if I didn't always know it but what mother wants to think that? Don't we all think that we've raised kids that don't do dirt?"

I couldn't answer. I had, on the day I found out about Tyler's murder, realized that I was probably lying to myself about Jon.

"You may well have ignored it," Layla said.

"Then how does it happen, how did I lose him anyway?"

"Black Entertainment Television. HBO specialty series. Video Games. Text messaging. You name it," I answered.

"That stuff doesn't help our cause," Jill said, "But I don't know if I can blame those things."

"Look, you raised Tyler right," I said, realizing that I had done so for myself more than for her. I was raising Jon in the same way and with the same beliefs and values as she had raised Tyler.

"Then why is he dead?" Jill asked all of us and none of us.

The waitress came with our food. She sat Layla's salad down in front of her and we watched as she asked for the extra dressing that she always asked for after the food comes. Jill tied her hair back into a ponytail. It was already re-approaching her bicep quickly but for the time being her layered cut long past its natural summer auburn highlights made her look younger and I thought for an instant letting mine grow. My much rougher hair was usually up and so I thought a bit about wearing it down more as I watched one small sliver of hair escape her ponytail and fall softly down next to her face. She caught me looking and smiled at me. She caught me looking and somewhere behind her smile a much different Jill was waiting. This one seemed more desperate around the eyes but desperate for what I didn't know. Layla caught us both looking and reached over to grab Jill's hand. Jill caught mine up and it was clear that we had decided to say grace over the meal, an act we hadn't engaged in regularly since we were all young and in college. The waitress approached and stopped short when she noticed our formation. We sat, I thought waiting for one of us to initiate but we just sort of squeezed each other's hands. Then I answered her question.

"I don't, Jilly. I just don't know."

Episode Three – Scene Four

Jill

Savannah, you're going to have to fix it. Frank's going to make sure that you lose Jon. He won't do it on purpose. Of course he won't do it on purpose, that's not what I'm saying at all. You can't raise a boy by just talking to him. You can't keep them alive by psychoanalyzing them. Frank means well, he does and he loves Jon, any one can see that. But you've said it yourself, Savannah, sometimes he just seems sort of callous and unconnected.

Savannah

Where did that new cell phone come from? Jon hasn't been getting any allowance for the past three months now. Frank is good with Jon. Is there such a thing as saying no too much with kids? He does have a way with ignoring tears though. Can you not know that you parents love you? I think that I know my dad even loved me. He just couldn't express it over all the other voices he heard. You can't fight the war over and over again every night and play jacks with your daughter. But he loved me. He does take his food and purposefully move away from John though. But usually the boy has done something stupid. I stay and eat though.

Layla

What does that mean? Jill, I know you're hurting but you're out of line, sis. This is what Frank and anybody else with even a little bit of college would call projection. You're stretching for some blame and I don't think you should be stretching toward Frank. Frank would not try and sabotage the only child he's got. Let's not slip off the edge of reality ladies. Tyler is gone and it hurt's all of us, but his being gone isn't an omen for Jon. Or Frank for that matter.

Jill

I worked so hard at trying to be a figure that I might have overdone it. My brother kept telling me to be harder on him, not to make him soft and I did it. I did it and it made him dead, you guys. I wish I had loved him a little more. No, not like loving him with my heart, I did that and I think Ty knew it. I know. I know Ty knew it but I would have loved him more with my hands and my face and my car, I would have hugged him and made him want to say home with me rather than be in the street.

Savannah

Those pants were new the other day, too and he acts like I never taught him to not borrow stuff. Just causes trouble. You mess it up and then I've got to call parents and explain. Missing curfews. Coming home high. Has he been high in my house and I didn't know? I would know. I'm a paramedic. I would know if he was high. Do things have to be so cut and dry? Frank has a rubric for everything the boy does. If he comes in late Savannah, do X. If he doesn't finish his chores, do Y. If he doesn't complete his chores well, do A. Is it really that simple? Should I let it be? Shouldn't the reasons count and can't I do half of A? I knew we shouldn't have taken this Baby BMW. Can't even stretch out good.

Layla

You being hard on Tyler didn't kill him, Jill. How in the world can you say that? I know you don't believe that. Well, not deep down you don't. Besides, you and Savannah really are in totally different situations. While we're on the subject of fathers and sons can we get off on Tyler's trifling daddy? You know I never did like him anyway. Oh, I guess we can't get on him. Because he ain't here is he? All of the hugs and kisses in the world don't stop a boy from choosing to act like a fool. Hear what I mean, Jill and not what I'm saying.

Jill

I hear you, sweetie. I now you don't mean me harm. You never would, Sav neither. But, I would have taken more little road trips with him and brought him some more of the things he needed instead of watching him go without. Savannah, don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. I know why Ty is wearing the same pair of gym shoes everyday. I know what Frank did and I even know why Frank did it, but I don't think the decision was a good one. I heard what he did the other morning. I was there, girl. He told you, but I heard it.

Savannah

He's wearing those shoes because he keeps letting his grades drop. There should be some consequence for that, right? Besides, they're good shoes. I grew up with one pair of gym shoes. He doesn't have to have five or six. I know he went and sneaked one of the other pairs out of the garage. Frank told me to take them to work with me so he couldn't get to them. But none of the other kids have just one pair. They were teasing him. Frank took them to his office when he saw that I didn't take them to work with me. But not before Jon got a pair.

Layla

My dad used to kick my little brother's tail on the daily. It was like a vitamin. Sometimes my dad would say that if my brother hadn't done something wrong then to count the whipping a pre-payment on something that he was going to do later or as the aftermath of some ignorance my father hadn't found out about. My brother knew two things and he'll tell you what I'm about to tell you himself. One, my dad was usually right about the fact that my brother was either planning something stupid or he could always think of something illicit and

Jill

If Frank was counting on Jon's knowing that he loved him and always would from that fiasco then he's banking wrong, Savannah. If Jonathan is using then he needs help and support. I now that's your husband and all Savannah, but I love you and Jon and Frank. He's a good man and a fantastic psychiatrist but I wonder if his being a really good psychiatrist just doesn't sap his ability to be a good father

Savannah

He's not a touchy kind of man. It's not his way, never was. Maybe he should hug Jon more. He doesn't do much stuff with him. I need him to be. I think that I might like him to just pull me close to him on the sofa. To hold my hand in the store. Christ, I'm becoming one of those women. I want to wither. I don't want to paint apartments when tenants move out anymore.

Layla

or illegal that he had done and gotten away with. And two, he knew my dad loved him to frigging death. Okay, the shoes you're going to have to fill me in on, Sav but Jon told me himself that his dad served up a six piece on him. But when he told me about it he didn't sound like he felt tortured or anything. He was kind of working his jaw around and so I asked him about it. He said, "Dad punched me in the face. And stomach. Coupla times." He wasn't outraged and frankly, he didn't seem too surprised.

Jill

I'm not saying that. I'm not saying psychiatrists make bad fathers. Layla I'm not saying Frank is a bad father. He's an effective father but I don't know that he's a good one. Effective doesn't mean good. Well, I mean he works and he's educated and he brings home good money. You guys take great vacations and you have a beautiful home. He's respected by everybody. He tithes, he volunteers at the food bank.

Savannah

I guess you'd really write Frank off if you knew we didn't even take him to Barbados last winter. Frank's idea. Bad grades, bad friends calling the house. Attitude. We don't reward bad behavior. Well, that's what I've been told. I've been told that this is a cornerstone of our parenting philosophy. To me that's like saying you can't go to a church party. Thanks for not telling it, Layla. Lord knows I don't want Jill off on that for another two hours. Frank knows what's best right? Maybe I was just selfish. I love Barbados. Fire department was killing me. Fire after fire in the cold. Jumpers, over-dosers and then those two new roughnecks with woman problems. I needed that vacation. He's been on three continents and tons of countries.

Layla

So, Frank's a bad father? In whose world is Frank a bad dad? That's right, he is a good man and Savannah, you better not ever forget it. You picked him and had kids with that man for a reason. Effective? What the heck does that mean? Effective is good the last time I checked. When he goes volunteering his son is in tow. What are fathers and sons supposed to do, Jill? Climb Mt. Everest? Throw a big old football and go to boy scouts?

Jill

But Layla, I've been in Savannah's house now for three months and from September until now I can count on one hand the number of times he's kissed her or looked at her like she is the reason he keeps smiling every day. Okay, that's just too vivid an image for me. The only time I see him interacting with Jon is when they're getting ready to leave the house to run some errands or when he's kicking his seventeen year old behind like he was a grown man.

Savannah

He doesn't do much with him. Every time I come home from work Frank's in one room and Jon's in another. Sometimes it doesn't even look like Frank's cooked for him. But he loves him. He's got to love him. It's his son. We block out BET. We take him to church. He loves his son and he knows what he's doing. What in God's name would I do if something happened to my son? How do you recover from that? I have laughed with this child until my heart floated out of my chest. You can't get that back. You can't stand at your husband's bedroom door and be moved to tears by his sleeping.

Savannah

I guess you haven't considered that this may actually be one of the roots of the problem you tawdry cock-blocker. Maybe the man's slobbering on his wife daily when her best friend isn't sitting up in the same living room, hallway and laundry room skinning, grinning and gossiping. Personally, had Frank not kicked Jon's tail I would have. You act like a man you should get treated like one. What do you think fathers and sons do, girl?

Jill

I know that Frank knows his dad loves him but HOW does he know it? Should it be knowledge you have to purposefully access like when you're solving something. Is it enough to know it? Instead of having to think about the fact that your dad loves you , shouldn't it just be omnipresent and filled with something that never drops below the surface? What a minute now, Layla. I don't think Savannah has a problem with me saying what I'm saying. If we're going to call ourselves friends then we have to tell it all. Savannah, some of what I've seen Jon doing around the house, some of the ways I've seen him acting are the same ways that Tyler had

Savannah

Jon acts like Tyler did? This probably isn't good. But Jill doesn't really know what Tyler was doing. Am I missing something?

Savannah

Somebody's got to teach him how to go to the store and how to keep his family's car running. Junebug on the street sure as hell won't do it. Maybe you ought to think about the fact that it may just look different to you, Jill. Because you've never had it. Your dad was in and out. Tyler's dad was all the way out. Man love may just look different. You just may not be able to pick it out of a love lineup. Personally, I think you ought to stop ragging on Savannah's husband. She is still in the car you know. Murder isn't contagious. Believe me, I know what that it seems like it sometimes, but let's not forget that.

Jill

I can say that now. Just now I can say that my son was probably a criminal and I probably let him be one because I didn't let him know that I loved him enough to make criminality unnecessary. Are you sure, I don't remember this on the way. I-64 East? Okay, this is not college and I've gotten much better about driving and map reading. Look, don't make me get special up in here. You are too silly. Savannah, you are my girl...my sister and I love you. I would not want what has happened to me to ever happen to you.

Savannah

He has gotten more surly, more resistant to us. My son isn't like those boys on street corners. My son is smart and he gets mad when I imitate retarded people in the car. He always has. He doesn't play sports anymore but he has other interests now. He naps more but he's just tired after school. He's productive when he's up. When I stay on him. I should search his room. He doesn't look the guys in my old neighborhood. Jill might be right.

Layla

You need I-64 East off of I-81 coming up, Jill. I don't know if love is an antidote to decision making. Just go where I tell you to. Because as I remember, you were the one that ate up three precious hours of beach black man debauchery because you couldn't figure out that south is east on a circle freeway. You were a cock blocker then too, wasn't she Savannah. Silly Jilly, too shy to make the first move on an historically black man before all the tourists got there and soaked them up. Get special? I thought the Olympics were well underway

Jill

I'm not dying a little everyday, I am killing myself a little everyday and believe me there is a difference. Each and every day I wake up and realize that my son is still dead, that I let him slip from the womb to the grave in a short seventeen years, I destroy a few more cells. One day a few in the tip of my left index finger. The next I notice that Sister Etta's version of *Blessed Assurance* doesn't quite make it to the rafters. Another day there is a little dimple in my bicep, almost imperceptible. And with each little excision – can you pass the trail mix- I actually feel a little bit better.

Savannah

Frank doesn't know struggle. He hasn't done hood. He has no clue about what's out there on these streets today. How can he? What does a man's love for his son look like? All this time I've trusted Frank's illustration. I haven't even looked at anyone else's. Layla's not married. My father had his own demons. I approached that man with purposeful announcement right up until the day he stopped answering. Daddy was naked in the tub and so I never noticed the red bathwater then. It couldn't look like that. My mother only knew Frank for a year before she

Layla

Well that was a wet blanket on the road trip.

Jill

Yeah, I guess it was wasn't it.

Layla

Sav, you weeping now? You
allright?

Savannah

died and she never thought he would be good for anything more than a lot of money.
Educated Negroes forget, she would say. Can't have a white mind in a black family. Even when
she died she liked him but never trusted him to handle the hard stuff. You're going to have to do
it. My mother had said that, too.

"I'm good."

**In the Superior Court of Gloucester
County, the STATE OF VIRGINIA vs.
Percival Tillman**

**INDICTMENT FOR VIOLATION
G.S. 13 Section 809c
Kidnapping**

THE GRAND JURY CHARGES:

**that Percival Tillman, age 16, of Hampton Roads in the County of Gloucester and State of
Virginia, on the 14th day of January, 2005, in the town of Hampton Roads, did abduct
from the 5000 block of Martin Luther King Boulevard, in the County of Gloucester and
State of Virginia, in the town of Hampton Roads, with the intent to take the life of Tyler
Johnson, age 17. The Grand Jury further charges that Percival Tillman, age 16 did hold
Tyler Johnson against his will in conveyance to Tarver Ball Fields located at 1555 Vine
Street, in the County of Gloucester and State of Virginia, in the town of Hampton Roads.**

A TRUE BILL

Date: 11/13/05
Foreman: M. Carter

**In the Superior Court of Gloucester
County, the STATE OF VIRGINIA vs.
Percival Tillman**

**INDICTMENT FOR VIOLATION
G.S. 13 Section 613a
Murder in the Second Degree**

**THE GRAND JURY CHARGES:
that Percival Tillman of Hampton Roads in the County of Gloucester and State of
Virginia, on the 14th day of January, 2005, in the town of Hampton Roads, did commit
murder in the second degree by shooting, with the intent to kill and therefore ending the
life of Tyler Johnson, age 17.**

A TRUE BILL

**Date: 11/13/05
Foreman: M. Carter**

GLOUCESTER COUNTY DISTRICT COURT

<u>STATE OF VIRGINIA</u>)	CASE NO. <u>06MC50069</u>
Plaintiff)	G.S. 12 Section 449
)	G.S. 13 Section 809c
VS.)	G.S. 13 Section 613a
)	FILED 01/14/05
<u>PERCIVAL TILLMAN</u>)	
Defendant)	

**UNITED STATES. RESPONSE TO DEFENDANTS MOTION FOR
BILL OF PARTICULARS**

Gloucester County, through its undersigned attorney, Donald Kissel, hereby responds to Defendant's Motion for Bill of Particulars. The Indictment in the case and the extensive discovery to be afforded the defendant prior to trial will be sufficient to fully apprise him of the charges pending against him and to enable him to prepare for trial. In addition, this Response voluntarily provides defendant with further details regarding the Indictment. Accordingly, there is no need for a formal bill of particulars in this case and therefore the defendant's Motion should be denied.

**A. Purposes and Requirements
of a Bill of Particulars**

The general purposes of a bill of particulars are to inform the defendant of the charges against him with sufficient precision to: (1) enable him to prepare his defense, (2) obviate surprise at trial, and (3) enable him to plead his acquittal or conviction in the case as a bar to subsequent prosecution for the same offense. *United States v. Davis*, 582 F.2d 947, 951 (5th Cir. 1978), cert. denied, 441 U.S. 962 (1979). A bill of particulars should not be expanded into a device to circumvent the restrictions on pretrial discovery of specific evidence contained in Fed. R. Crim. P. 16. *Cooper v. United States*, 282 F.2d 527, 532 (9th Cir. 1960). See also *Davis*, 582 F.2d at 951 ("generalized discovery is not a permissible goal of a bill of particulars"). Where the indictment itself and the bill of particulars supplied by the government provide the defendant with adequate information with which to conduct his defense, additional requests for particulars should be denied. *Harlow v. United States*, 301 F.2d 361, 367-68 (5th Cir.), cert. denied, 371 U.S. 814 (1962).

In analyzing requests for a bill of particulars or information to be disclosed in one, courts have not confined themselves to the indictment or to the government's voluntary bill, if provided. Rather, courts have taken into account other sources of information provided by the government, including discovery materials. *United States v. Long*, 706 F.2d 1044, 1054 (9th Cir. 1983) (broad discovery can serve as a substitute for the "trial preparation" function of a bill of particulars). See, e.g., *United States v.*

Feola, 651F. Supp. 1068, 1133 (S.D.N.Y. 1987) (court considered whether the information requested had been provided elsewhere, including through discovery).

In this case, in addition to the detailed and clearly-worded indictment, the government will provide the defendant with sources of information under its general discovery obligations. Pursuant to Fed. R. Crim. P. 16, the government will make available

B. Gloucester County. Voluntary Bill of Particulars

The government voluntarily discloses the following information, corresponding in number to the requests in defendants Motion:

- 1.) The various individuals and corporations who will be called as witness for the prosecution on count one, murder in the second degree are:

Brian Johnson	Jill Johnson
P.O. Gregory Lawrence	P.O. Mitchell Juarez
Phillip Johnson	Lawrence "Red" Powers
Antoine Stevens	Fiona and Elliot Thomas
Gloucester County Coroner's Office	Detective Alonzo DeStefano

- 2.) The particulars of count one Murder in the Second Degree and count two, Kidnapping, in limited detail so as not to impinge upon discovery, are as follows: Defendant, Percival Tillman did knowingly and with intent to kill, lure the victim, Tyler Johnson, age 17, into an automobile owned by Lawrence "Red" Powers, age 19 in order to take him to the Tarver Ball Fields. Defendant, upon arriving at the Tarver Ball Fields did forcibly remove the victim, Tyler Johnson from the vehicle in order to convey him to the bathrooms beyond field number 4 on the west side of the complex. Defendant, Percival Tillman did physically assault the defendant in order to complete said conveyance after a chase, doing damage to the victim's spleen, right collarbone, left upper mandible in addition to various avulsions and lacerations to the face. Defendant did then, knowingly and with the intent to kill Tyler Johnson, victim, shoot him eight times; two shots to the head; three shots to the torso, collapsing the left lung and penetrating the left ventricle; one shot to the right arm; and two shots to groin area, specific aimed at the testicles. All shots were delivered in a range of less than five feet. Victim was forced to kneel in front of the defendant with the fingers of his hands interlaced behind his own head.
- 3.) In light of the defendant's change of plea and subsequent indictment, plaintiffs request that counsel for the defendant voluntarily submit the following information in order to comply with court requirements to avoid surprise in litigation. Plaintiffs request the following information:
 - 1.) Defendants grounds for reversal of plea
 - 2.) List of witnesses to be subpoenaed
 - 3.) Defendant's statement regarding timeline of events on date of crime

- 4.) Counsel for Defendant will have access to ballistics reports and all forensic and coroners information once completed by the corresponding agencies.

Conclusion

The defendant has or shortly will have access to extensive information in this case through (1) the detailed and precisely-worded indictment; (2) voluminous discovery to be afforded him under Rule 16, Jencks and Brady; and (3) details summarized in this response. This information is more than sufficient to fully apprise him of the charges pending against him and to enable him to prepare for trial. To the extent he seeks evidentiary details in excess of these needs, his requests exceed the proper scope of a bill of particulars. Accordingly, the Motion should be denied.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald Kissel
Virginia State Bar No. 0964444
Gloucester County Court
Criminal Division
Elm Street, Suite 1011
Hampton , Virginia 10018 -4717
(714) 888-9400

Season Two

Now the world is ready for you/

and the wonders you can do/

Make a hawk a dove/

stop a war with love/

Make a liar tell the truth/

Wonder Woman?

Get us out from under, Wonder Woman

Episode One – the return of Wonder Woman

Date: Thurs, 17 January 2005 11:18:09
From: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
To: doc_Layla@cincichristian.hosp

So since you're upstairs in my guest bedroom, I just can't seem to get you heifers out of my house, go to 134.62.44.3993. Well, put it into your browser's address window and then click enter. Carla told me you she put the greasemonkey on your laptop there. Once you do that go to CNN.com and see what you see. WE ARE IN. Yah been hoodwinked, bamboozled.....

Date: Thurs, 17 January 2005 11:21:14
From: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
To: STARCARLA@cincichristian.hosp

Quick 134.62.44.3993. I found them. Let me know when you get there.

Date: Thurs, 17 January 2005 11:45:09
From: STARCARLA@cincichristian.hosp
To: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com

Hey now! I thought you had given up. I haven't heard from you. Thanks, cuz girl, I had given up. Have you found any sites where it's working yet? I hear CNN is a big hoodwinked site. Going to play around. When is the good doctor coming in?

Date: Thurs, 17 January 2005 11:51:02
From: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com
To: STARCARLA@cincichristian.hosp

She's upstairs in my guest bed now. She's coming in there at 6p. I think you're gone by then. Good, don't get caught. She's right, you need your job. Thanks for getting me hooked on this crap. I've been trying portals and page names/numbers since you first told me about it. Now that I'm in, I really have no idea how to use it. Checked out CNN.com though, interesting....

Date: Thurs, 17 January 2005 11:59:44
From: STARCARLA@cincichristian.hosp

To: WonderWoman@notmichealJordanfamily.com

I'm here till 7p, so I'll overlap her. Don't let her fool you; she's been over my shoulder in between patients trying to see if I've found a way in. She may not be "hooked" but she's definitely interested. I'm going to get in her laptop so that when she gets here she can play around too. The truth shall set us free and we can just let 'em have all the truth we want to. See ya girl. Do you work tomorrow? Don't bring 3000 crazies up in here tomorrow. You know the moon'll be full. We love you firefighters, but we sure get tired of looking at you. Peace....two fingers....

"What's going on?"

"I am a proud member of Hoodwinked. I got in. Jill, Layla and Carla, you know from the hospital, are in, too. Finally."

Frank pulled the office chair from the kitchen desk and rolled it into his office next to me. He hated it when I played on his computer and I thought it was nice of him to not be angry about my being there. It was one of the few things he ever got really tangibly angry about.

"I meant with Virginia but this is interesting, too. When did you get in?"

"Probably just after you left for the office. Layla is in Jill's room by the way. She's trying to get a few hours in before going to the hospital and she didn't want to go all the way home to come all the way back to this side of town," I said.

"Well, then where's Jill?"

"Coffee Shop. Look."

"Is she okay?"

He was killing my techno buzz. "Fine."

"Really?"

I was uncomfortable with the tone of his voice. It wasn't surprise, he definitely wasn't startled. He wasn't impressed but he wasn't necessarily concerned either. Not in the way your husband thinking about your friend is expected to be. It was more like suspicion. Suspicion was beyond concern, multiplied by some unknown degree. "See, it let's me write messages on top of their website text without altering their page. Other Hoodwinkers can see it and respond to my comments."

“Is that CNN’s real web page?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, with Hoodwinked on top of it. Because the greasemonkey is on, Hoodwinked’s page just sort of lays overtop like it’s a part of CNN’s page. If I want to talk about one of their headlines, I just click near it on the hoodwinked icons.

“What’s the point?”

“What do you mean what’s the point?”

“Well, why do they do it? What do they say? I mean, that you can’t send an email or pick up the phone and say to the people you think want to hear it.”

“This way you don’t have to be limited by or to the people that you personally think will be interested in what you have to say. You can post here and people can respond to you.”

Frank lowered one eyelid, the left one. I gave him a minute to think about his next question as he thought about how to phrase it so as not to sound like he was deciding that he couldn’t care less. After a few seconds he asked, “So why not a weblog or message board?”

“Any body can post to one of those. Here only other Hoodwinkers can bandy back and forth. I don’t know, it feels kind of neat to know that when people open sites like CNN.com or JusticeWatch.org or – Oooo Blackamerica Web- that they aren’t getting the whole story. That I know something they don’t. I get to titter knowing that CNN has no idea we are attacking the rhetorical bullshit they post here. Besides, I think that people are invested more since they have to earn a place on the page. It seems to make the conversations better.”

“So...it’s about techno snobbery,” Frank said laughing and rubbing my thigh.

I giggled but he knew it was false. He stood up behind my chair and began to rub my shoulders, down my back. “Show me,” he said.

I did. I spent the next forty minutes showing my husband how I could write my comments right along the control bar on CNN.com. I clicked on the drop down box marked, “the other side of the coin” and a Hoodwinked menu appeared giving us the chance to choose which discussion we wanted to participate in. There was a critical race discussion going on about the nature of Michael Jackson’s legal problems. We posted our thoughts among those of other medical professionals and shed some important light on the anti-depressant debate spurred by the Brook Shields-Tom Cruise Controversy. A message board would have talked about movies, makeup and Cruises’ breakup. Frank left some information about two new drugs for depression

and Bi-Polar disease that were showing tremendous potential. Frank laughed from the small of his back and it felt like summer moonlight.

“And so, what’s with the suitcases and Hefty bags in the hall.”

“That is Jon’s old life,” I said turning my chair around to face him. He was, I knew, going to be proud of me and the thought of his pride was making my position in front of him seem like a very good idea.

“Come again?”

“Well, those bags are his way too baggy jeans, his single color t-shirts, his tacky little red baseball hats and every bandana I could get my hands on,” I said.

Frank lowered his left eyelid and I annihilated his next question with the rest of my plan.

“In the course of cleaning him out I also found this really very ignorant set of faux gold and diamond teeth. Our son has a grill,” I said enunciating every syllable for effect. John raised his left eyelid.

“You’re shitting me?”

“No. That’s the really funny part of the whole mess.”

“It’s not funny, Sav.”

“Made you cuss. It’s got to be funny.”

Frank blushed, the dark skinned black man’s bright light that sort of makes them look gilded washed over him. “Still no good at it? After all these years?”

“Well, I don’t think you’re supposed to finish it off. Most of the time you can’t tell it ends in –ing.”

“Whoops.”

“Don’t worry about it, it doesn’t suit you anyway,” I said, rubbing the zipper on his jeans.

Frank crossed his hands in front of his chest and gave me a violated school girl look.

“What are you going to do with Jon’s former life?”

“We are going to have a bonfire and you are invited. We are going out to the chimanea and we are going to toss the hoodrat uniform right into out. Jon’s going to serve fruit salad to go with the turkey burgers. It’s only going down to fifty tonight. It’ll be all Huxtable.”

Frank pulled me up from the chair and wrapped his arms around my waist. He held me there and just looked at me for a few seconds. I could see myself in his eyes.

“When is 75 Cent due home?” Frank asked.

“7:30.”

“When does Dr. Quinn leave?”

“In a half hour. She’s close enough to wake up at 6:30 and still be to work on time.”

“That gives us less than an hour.” Frank’s voice was replete with your-friends-are-getting-to-be-a-hassle.

“She’s a doctor, not a virgin. We’ll start now and run her out early.

I shinnied past him, letting my hand graze his butt as I did. It never dawned on me that I was running up the steps two at a time like a teenager.

Jon strode up the street towards home looking like it was the last place he wanted to be. What he didn’t know though is that his father and I were putting our clothes back on in the bedroom on the front of the house. We saw him bopping along and holding his pants up as he came up the street. He was an attractive boy. When he wasn’t dressed like a gang member. I smiled as I looked at his shoulders shimmying side to side under a leather jacket we’d bought him last winter. One of our neighbors, Mr. Gannon waved at him and Jon crossed the street to help him get his bags out of the trunk. Jon apparently said something funny because Mr. Gannon laughed and gave him a friendly shove on the shoulder. Jon smiled widely at Mr. Gannon, obviously impressed with his ability to get a rise out of the old man. A warm sensation washed over my abdomen and I thought that this must be the expectant feeling of warm cookies before they come out of the oven. The cookies know they will make someone happy. It has to feel good to them near the end. He crossed back to our side of the street and I saw him putting on his disgruntled son look as he approached. Apparently only we were good enough for such dissatisfaction. I forced myself from the window to find Frank watching me. He knew I was steeling my will.

His eyelid started to lower and I said, “Ready for the barbecue? Let’s go down and redefine the word grill for dear, oppressed Jonathan Jordan.”

“After you Claire,” Frank said bending at the waist and giving me a wide flourish with his hand.

Jon was surprised to see us coming down from the top of the house. Despite his surprise though, he managed to hold on to his disconsolate look. Not without trouble though. He got a natural and generous sense of nosiness from my mother.

“You’re right on time. Just in time as a matter of fact,” I said. I motioned for Jon to follow me and he sighed audibly. Frank fell into place behind him. We had set up a parental perimeter. His feet grew suddenly heavy and you could hear each footstep thud heavily on the granite floor tiles. I thought about what he must be thinking about. Forced dinner with parents. Lecture about something that he was sure he’d gotten away with. Another dish washing and floor mopping clinic because he’d been doing a poor job.

“How was the community service?” Frank asked with a lilt that surely let Jon know that something was awry.

“Mandatory,” Jon said. “I don’t know who decided that studying American Government in high school would be better and more interesting if we volunteered but they were wrong.”

“Well,” Frank said slapping him on the shoulder, “schools have changed.”

Jon sighed again and let his bookbag flop onto the floor at the door of the kitchen. He perked up a bit though when he saw the serving trays and the lit chimenea. For a second he looked as if he still liked our outdoor meals and I had to fight back a feeling of wistful admiration for what God had given us.

“Jon, could you please serve the fruit salad. We thought we’d eat outside tonight. The CD player is out there, too. What would you like to hear?”

“Frankie Beverly? Can we listen to Frankie Beverly?”

I was surprised by the answer. That was our music and we hadn’t listened to it on a porch night in what felt like a month of Sundays. We hadn’t had a porch night in about as long. Jon was making this hard.

Frank stepped in to help me over, “I’ll get the turkey burgers if you’ll get the CD Savannah.”

It gave me a few more seconds to ground my resolve. When I came back and out onto the deck I heard Frank telling Jon that he had no idea about the suit cases and trash bags. We served our food and then I stoked the fire in the chimenea once more before sitting. And to think, I thought, Frank thought a chimenea this big was ridiculous. We had to recruit Jon and three of his friends from the neighborhood to help us get it home.

“What’s with the stuff?” Jon asked.

“Family activity. We’ll get to it after we eat. It’ll be fun,” I said.

We ate to good music. We laughed a bit. Jon announced that he was about to blow a major quarter long project. It was due early in December and he was to have turned in a bibliography and preliminary rough draft by now. I had him go get his bookbag and when he did I thumbed through the precious little research he had gathered. The teacher's note on the bottom of Jon's otherwise empty rubric indicated she would take his project even though he hadn't met the earlier deadlines. I tore a blank piece of paper out of his notebook, listed several sources, wrote a timeline for his research and a unique angle for investigating his topic all while ignoring Frank's light kicks under the table. The boy obviously needed some help, he was going to fail. I ignored Jon, too when he asked me how he was supposed to get that much research done in such as short amount of time. Jon offered no other resistance.

"Anybody want seconds?" I asked. Frank and Jon both shook their heads.

I stood up from my seat and walked to the large suitcase. Dragging it purposefully for effect I said, "What we have here is an opportunity to make a change in the life of a child."

Jon smiled, "Isn't that one of those feed the children commercials?"

I hadn't realized that the line wasn't mine until then. "So, it is. I guess, metaphorically then, I'm holding your picture." Jon looked confused. Frank looked ecstatic. I tried to really gesture large as I moved the zippers but succeeded only in making the bag expand. Two or three awkward zips later, I had the bag opened and facing me on the deck near the chimanea. I started into an impromptu and satirical parody of a funeral complete with a 'we are gathered here today' and some declarative amens. Frank joined me with a "speak" and "preach preacher" or two from his seat. Jon was amused by us. Until I pulled out his tawdry ghetto jeans.

"Those are mine."

"We are laying these to rest in order that a new man...I said a new man, might arise again in his place."

"Preach."

We commit these jeans to the grave where all good thugs come to rest."

"Alright, Alright."

"And we do not mourn their passing for the wearer is in a better place."

"Whoa Glory."

"And because we have faith, we can walk on in the newness of suburbia, good grades and the law."

Frank jumped up out his seat and was summarily slain in the spirit. Not so much though that he couldn't keep feeding me pieces of clothing.

Jon watched us burn his clothes with a level of disgust so new, so potent that for a moment I breathed rapidly and he looked less like my son.

When the local fire department arrived to address the presence of what someone in the neighborhood had called in as heavy smoke, I went to the front door, flashed my badge at them and watched them drive off.

Episode Two – Scene One

What I hit was akin to a runner's high. I was batting ahead of the averages, punting for touchbacks, sailing on a high wind. I could not be stopped. I was starting IV's at work as if me and the vein were contiguous. Hearts started pumping again when I was around. The overdosed started breathing again. An old woman in congestive heart failure, through the squeakiness of air that won't go in or out without a fight, told me that she felt better mainly because I was there. I walked up on a kid with a gun shot wound to the stomach. He was bleeding out fast and kept closing in that not induced by sleep kind of way. I intubated him almost immediately. It was like his throat just opened up for me. Before I knew it I had also secured an IV and was on the end of the cot lifting it for transfer to the transport unit. I rode along to the hospital in the back to give the transport medics an extra set of hands. When we got to Cincinnati Christian's emergency room, Layla was waiting bedside in the trauma rooms curtained off from the rest of the ER as if patterned curtains was enough to keep trauma from traumatizing the other emergency room patients.

"What do you have?" Layla asked.

"Seventeen year old male, GSW entrance to the right upper quadrant, approximately sixteen minutes old now, no exit. Possible drug use prior to shooting. Witnesses state he was shot while unconscious and down on the street. Decreasing level of consciousness. Heart rate fifty-eight, BP 108 over 56, respirations 8 per minute. He's got a patent IV in the left antecubital. Coma cocktail given. He's intubated with a 7.5 tube, 22 inches at the lip."

"Is the tube good?" Layla interrupted.

I glared at her. "As if – " I answered, switching from work mode to friend mode. Layla didn't, she never so much as cracked a smile. I switched back quickly, "He's got a tracheal shift now, probably needs to have a lung popped. We can't get the bleeding controlled but did slow it with direct pressure. Monitor show sinus bradycardia."

Layla moved to the feet of the patient and picked up her end of the backboard he lay on. We moved him, my friend and me, to the hospital bed without counting three. She looked at me and we moved. I watched her as she realized her positioning in the room. She knew she needed to let her emergency residents in but loved the work she did so much that it made sharing it hard. She took two steps back from the patient and then began to assign tasks to the younger doctors in the room. One of the new residents stepped up beside me and asked what our coma cocktail was.

I answered him that Cincinnati paramedics used glucose and Narcan and not vitamin B12 like some other places. I slid out and away from the bed. Layla pointed, directed and corrected. People acted and then looked to her for approval. They performed and then across their faces moved latent satisfaction from getting a peaceful nod and further instructions from her. Layla, with her brown face, broad shoulders and whittled waist was amazing and it made me proud. She moved to the patient's head to make sure that the resident there had confirmed the endotracheal tube placement and when she did her shoulders collapsed and she dropped her head. Terror flew across the resident's face.

"We just worked on this kid two days ago."

The resident exhaled, safe until the next round.

"Carla," she yelled, "check the computer for this boy. What's this boy's name? Check and see if he wasn't here two or three days ago for a drug overdose. Confirm for me he's sixteen."

Carla scrambled off, giving me a shoulder shrug that said she wouldn't have time to talk about all the talking we'd been doing on hoodwinked. Behind me the hospital security guards scrambled pass and I assumed it was to try and control the car load of people that had tried to follow us to the hospital as if they had lights and sirens. Carla's face appeared from behind the curtain.

"Brian Dempsey, sixteen years old, last seen here three days ago, not two, for a heroin overdose for which you all gave Narcan and a day's observation." Having nothing else to add her face pulled back behind the flimsy curtain just as the respiratory therapists stepped through it on the other side of the trauma bay.

"Locate a mother so I can' whip her ass for her."

"Your lips were moving. You used your outside voice", I told Layla. As the doctors moved around the boy, his midline physical landmarks; his trachea, his sternum, shifted left and I kept thinking about Tyler who didn't even make this far. I watched Layla mumbling under her breath, more than likely imagining all the ways in which she might hit the boy's mother, ways she might strike the boy. It grew warm. I slipped through the curtain. I had paperwork to complete anyway. I made my way to Carla's desk where she was printing off wrist identification bands in case Brian Dempsey needed to be tracked any further than trauma bay one.

“I don’t know why in the world they decided to upset lady doc. Now I’ve got to put up with her grumpy ruminations about the state of black folk today. I could whip up on Mama Dempsey myself for that”, Carla said.

“You act like it doesn’t bother you”, I said

“It doesn’t. Well, not in the same way it does you two. These kids are just different than the ones before them. Besides, I don’t really feel like I have much room to judge. Got one in jail myself.”

I didn’t know that. In fact I really had never thought about how old Carla was, whether she had kids or wanted any. I stared into her mahogany face below her auburn hair and looked for laugh lines or the tiredness that age sometimes causes. I found nothing. A blank slate. Carla was a closed book.

“I didn’t know you had kids, Carla.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Maybe you’re right.”

“Girl, I’ve got three. Oldest one just turned twenty and he’s been in jail for a year. Streets got him”, Carla said not looking up from computer screen, like she had accepted it as part and parcel of both his and her life.

“Wow.”

Carla looked up with a strange pinched look. “Don’t cry for me, Argentina. I did what I could.”

“Did you?”

“What does that mean?” Carla’s eyes had a look young in their ferocity. Or maybe the ferocity was just young. About a year old I suspected.

“You know me well enough to know I didn’t mean it as an insult. I guess it just scares me, this thought of the streets getting him. It feels so random. Like there’s this thing that can just knock them over no matter what you do” I said.

“Well, there is such a thing. And, really I don’t know you well enough to know. You and the lady doc, I like you. I admire you and I like you. You sisters keep me going sometimes, but you’re not really like me. I’m hardscrabble, bad food and cussing. You,” she said pausing to look me up and down, “Even your work watch is nice.”

I shot my eyes down to the watch moving below my pen and then back at her wrist. She was right, I was embarrassed and Carla noticed.

“Don’t feel bad about it, Savannah. Hey, if you got it work it, I’m not mad at you. But I don’t know you anymore than you know me. We hang out in this small space for ten minutes at a time any random number of times every third day.

I stared at her but thought about all the times we had gone out for girl’s breakfast right after Layla’s night shift, my twenty-four hour shift. Layla had driven off from that hospital countless number of times to meet me without so much as asking Carla if she wanted to eat. Years ago, I wouldn’t have done that.

“Anyway,” Carla continued, “The youngest girl is eight and the boy in the middle is twelve. No, I don’t have a husband; yes, they all have the same father; and no, that negro hasn’t been around in years. I bought us a little house, and I’m stressing little – it’s little, over near those Habitat for Humanity houses on Summerville last summer.”

I had stopped writing to listen. Carla began to look different as I listened. Shinier.

She smiled at me and said, “Figured I answer all the stuff you’d want to know later. You know, after you get back in the unit and start praying to avoid getting another patient to bring back since you now realize you never took the time to ask me about my life.”

“Do you want to go to breakfast when we get off? At seven?”

“Have do drop off Sierra at school,” Carla said gathering her clipboard to register the patients coming in on ambulance cots behind me.

I tried to drop all the expression from my face, unsure of how she would take my continued embarrassment. “Oh. Okay.”

“But if you can wait until eight, I can go.” After she said it she smiled and I imagined that sometimes she smiles at her kids that way.

“Eight it’ll be,” I said. While I sensed that I felt like fourteen year old with new shoes I didn’t care. The popular girl had just allowed me to sit at her lunch table. She slinked behind me with that feminine shimmy that I never quite mastered and I heard her ask the paramedics behind me who they’d brought. She had a sing songy girlishness that seemed to infect the men transporting the patient with air – no with submission, willing submission. I decided, just then, that I would practice that and I let the sound of her voice echo over and over in my head.

“And Savannah,” Carla said over my shoulder, “Stop ragging on the white people. They’re not the only ones plotting on black folks. No black dads, young black mothers, black folk are doing a pretty good job themselves.”

“Carla, those CNN headlines have a spin. Black folks looting and white ones finding food. Please. You know it’s not right when-“

“Save it for breakfast. Save it sis. You’re partner is looking like he’s ready to go.

I stepped back inside the curtain to find Layla’s arm pushing a blood tube through the increasingly inanimate skeletal ribs of sixteen year old Brian Dempsey. Success shouted out as a thick stream of red blood sludged out steady and aromatic through the tube and into a container. I reeled a bit, the room every bit as chaotic as it was when I left it. Layla noticed.

“Sherri,” she called to the charting nurse to the left of the bed, “sign off on Dempsey so these firefighters can get back out there and bring our next one.”

I quickly shoved my paper under Sherri’s pen, racing to beat my own breath to the exit. As the curtain, a mere slip of cotton – a veil, flitted back down behind me I heard Layla screaming for the whereabouts of the Dempsey mother.

Scene Two

“Need anything on my way home tomorrow morning?”

“No, I thought I needed deodorant but I found another bottle under the sink.”

“You didn’t find it, I bought it. Noticed you were low last week.”

Frank paused, “It’s been under there all week?”

“Yep.”

“Thanks. I didn’t even realize I was running low until it ran out. Thanks, Savannah. How do you notice that? I don’t even notice my own deodorant getting low.”

“I’m awesome. Plain old awesome. Maybe you have time between clients this afternoon? Can you come past the firehouse for a quick visit? I’d like to see you.”

“Yeah, I think I can. My three o’clock obsessive compulsive usually cancels on Thursdays. I’ll cancel on her this time”, Frank said.

“Well, don’t cancel anything for it. The OCD needs you I’m sure.”

Frank dropped his voice into a rhythm- and- blues bass, “Yeah, well I want to see my wife.”

He always lowered his voice when he flattered me or said superfluous niceties. For him such phrases, laced with love, were meant to emanate from the diaphragm. I thought about my husband’s smartish nature. It had attracted me even more than his physical stature and cool pose. The fact that he reworked minds made me quiver from a place that I couldn’t readily identify. He was calmness and rationality when I was phobic and disheveled. He didn’t mind talking with me as opposed to talking to me. Frank, unlike any other man I had ever known could shut me down. He could take my aggressive female tongue and my unbridled sense of housing project comeuppance and bottle it, succinctly and completely. And when the time was right we created something so completely the synthesis of the two of us that neither one of us alone could understand him. We often just looked at Jon as he worked at the kitchen sink with his back to us or at the door to his room before he noticed us standing there outside the world of his IPOD. We would follow this gazing with a nod that acknowledged the other’s power and simultaneous submission. We often touched one another secondary to the nod; on the elbow, the small of the back, clasped hands. I had a husband.

Unlike my mother who from the time my father returned home from Vietnam, their marriage a short eight years old, till the time he killed himself, had a mate. My grandmother had

birthed six boys and raised four. Two died from the generalized health afflictions germane to being black in the thirties and forties. One ran off as a teenager, never to be heard from again. One was swept away by drug use. Two struggled through to manhood with Grandma Jo and despite the journey one found himself made dead by angry white men envious of the few pennies he managed to save. My mother had one living brother, Uncle Sylvester, Grandma Jo's middle boy. He had learned to live unobtrusively; had learned to move through this land of the living without commanding your attention or disturbing your existence. He wasn't bad or good, successful or a failure - he just was. Uncle Sylvester never had children.

Our conversation flitted about, touching on topics as varied as my adventures on Hoodwinked and why Frank never liked my stuffed bell peppers. We talked about how he wished my mom was still living and how he wished, sometimes, that his mom was around less. I wondered just how tired Frank could get of bossy black women in careers that forced them to hold their own among men. I pledged to examine which came first for women like us, the careers or the personalities that made them work. When I asked about how he and Jill were getting along when I wasn't there her answer was with a nondescript "fine".

"So, my goal is to be out of here, in my car and singing with the radio in thirty minutes. I'm coming to see you but I can't stay long. Maybe you want to suddenly fall ill? Come home and play with me?"

I was encouraged by the thought. I hadn't played hooky for Frank in a long time. The guys at the firehouse were particularly aggravating. It was like one of them had fought with his wife, come to work and then infected the others.

"Well? You coming or what?"

"Why can't you stay long? If you're coming in about thirty minutes, you could eat with us," I said. Considering it felt a bit odd.

"Sounds good, but I'm picking up Jonathan up from the Y. We're going golfing."

"You're not trying to get him to take it up again? You know how he acted the last -"

"Putt, Putt, Sav."

My embarrassment seeped through the silence. "Oh." Bossy, black woman advancing, inadvertently drawing out my husband's superhero; Infurioso, Captain colored man.

I let the silence linger for an extra moment assuring him that I had backed away from my mouth. "Why are you going golfing?" I asked.

“Do I need a reason?” Frank was using his playful- but- not- really tone of voice.

“No. Is something wrong?”

“In order for me to go Putt Putt golfing with my son, does there have to be?”

“Jill told me what you did to Jon in the basement.”

Frank said nothing. I assumed that he felt there was nothing to say about the several rounds he had gone with our son. I agreed with him in fact. There was no taking back the beating. I did, though, fully expect him to defend the independence of the action to me. Such seriousness was usually decided by joint decree. What if I didn’t agree to beating up our son? I didn’t agree. Nevertheless, Frank said nothing. He didn’t seem to see the incongruent nature of such an act. Elements were unordered in the cosmos.

“Jon and I haven’t been in a while. He asked a few weeks ago and I actually feel sort of bad that I’m just getting around to it. As I sat here this morning I was thinking about how silly we act when we go. Jon’s actually gotten quite funny over the years. He has a certain acerbic wit. It’s a dry sense of humor. The boy’s actually quite funny.”

I thought about that for a moment. “He is isn’t he? Just the other day he said something about firehouse life really being just like a lame house party.”

“What?” Frank gave an anticipatory giggle.

“He said that since firefighters are always getting shuffled into other firehouses to cover vacations and sick days, somebody always shows up at the party that you wouldn’t invite. Nobody’s drinking. Some meal or snack is always being served or passed around. There’s always some music playing that nobody is really listening to or that was played out last year. When he stopped by the firehouse last month on his way to one of the sites for his junior class community service we had finished eating and I was washing my car. Dave and I were listening to Gil Scott Heron.”

I let my next thought dribble out of my mind, content to listen to my husband laughing.

“Put my whole career in perspective for me,” I said. “Nineteen years of foolishness cleared up in an instant.”

Sav, are you getting a run? Frank asked, his voice still filled with air from laughing. Gotta go?”

“Yeah, they haven’t announced over the pager yet but I can hear it on the radio. I’ll call you later. Don’t worry about coming. We’ll probably get runs anyway.” We parted with matching see –you- later.

I hung up the phone and immediately called Layla, the lie I had told my husband still singeing my throat.

“Layla?”

She was on her way to the gym near the hospital but I proceeded to ask my friend if she would double back to the YMCA and see if Jon was expecting his father. To find out why Jon was expecting his father. To make sure Jon was actually at the YMCA and to text him if he wasn’t. It would be just like Jon to forget that his father and he had plans, instead opting for something immoral, illicit or illegal.

“Hell no.”

“What do you mean hell no? You’re supposed to be my best friend.”

“I’m one of your best friends,” Layla answered. “The one who won’t be complicit in your little tawdry lies. “It’s not a good idea to sneak and go against your husband. Never is, sis. I’m kind of surprised at you. If the boy is out doing wrong then he needs to get caught?”

I wasn’t disagreeing with her on that. “And beaten? The boy should be beaten?”

“Hell yes,” Layla answered. “I told you, I’ve got all the faith in Frank. Boys, after a certain age, need a daddy to raise them. After about thirteen, my mother never even spoke to my brother. Just pointed in my father’s direction. Hell, she’d call on the phone and my brother would have to ask who’s calling.”

I knew I shouldn’t have called her. “I’m not sneaking, not going against Frank.”

“Please, girl. You’re a smart woman. And manipulative, you’re a little bit manipulative. You well know that Frank would tell you that if Jon isn’t where he should be, then Jon is to blame for that. If Jon is to blame then Jon should pay the price. This is the nature of black manhood in America. You can’t buffer that boy from life, Savannah. Life won’t. Frank knows that.”

“I’m not.” I resented the implication but really didn’t have time or mental space to take it up with her further. “Frank just doesn’t see the importance of keeping Jon’s emotions safe yet.”

Layla moaned painfully and asked, “Do you remember Wonder Woman?”

“What?”

“Diana Prince, Wonder Woman. When we were young, remember she used spin around in circles and magically her hair would fall out of a spinster’s bun and she’d be dressed in red, white and blue rhinestoned lamé bikini briefs and a bustier? She used to keep Steve Trevor from certain death all the time. She’d swoop in and save him after he managed to get himself bungled up in some communist plot that everybody could see coming but him. It never dawned on Wonder Woman that maybe had she let him learn to fight on his own; he wouldn’t get into so many fights. He was a wuss. A sad, underachieving deadbeat, Sav. A wussy SUD.

My hip began to vibrate. It was Frank calling on my cell phone.

“Frank’s calling.”

“Whatever.”

I explained that it really was Frank, that I was probably going to let him go the voicemail so I could call me real best friend. The one who wouldn’t leave me hanging. The one that loved me enough to actually help me and not just talk. I realized after a very long ten or fifteen seconds that I was explaining it to any empty line.

I let Frank go to the answering machine as I dialed Jill.

“Jill?”

Jill was still at school and couldn’t leave. “I wouldn’t do it. Even if I could leave.”

“So,” I asked, daring her to answer incorrectly, “You want to see Jon get beat, too?”

“I didn’t say that. But, sweets, I have already ruined one person’s life. There is no way I’m going to add your marriage to the notches on my belt. I take it you called, Layla?”

“I did.”

“Dummy. I take it she said no?”

“Look, are you going to help me out or not?”

“Savannah, sometimes I wonder if your asymmetriphobia makes you a little bit dense.”

Then Jill lowered her voice and said, “It’s not that I don’t want to, but I’m not getting in the middle. Jon would know that we were all willing to lie for him, to tip him off about his own father. I’m not crazy about Frank’s tactics, but I won’t divide and conquer him, either. Hey, is there some reason you’re not calling Jon? Try him on his phone. Text him and ask what time his dad’s coming.

“What good will that do?

“It’ll at least remind him that Frank is coming. If Jon still fails to surface after that, at least you can say you helped him out. Are you getting a run?”

I was. I really was.

I hung up the firehouse phone, grabbed my cell and started taking far too long in pecking out a text message to Jon that asked him what time his dad was coming and where he was, honestly.

As I typed with my less than agile thumb, I trotted to the fire engine to respond to someone’s call for amorphous and typically meaningless abdominal pain. They weren’t making men like they used too. I remembered a day when twenty-four year old males dealt with tummy aches. Under the loud whine of the sirens I answered Jon’s call, holding the phone between my ear and my shoulder as I pulled on latex gloves.

“When is your father coming?” I asked too loud.

“In about an hour. What’s up?” Jon answered.

“Where are you? Honestly.”

“At the Y. Playing ball with the fellas.”

“How do I know that?”

“The panting didn’t give it away? How about the fact that it sounds like I’m talking inside a can of tuna. Sometimes, Mom, I’m actually doing the right thing.”

“Yeah, well, do it more often. I’ve got to go.”

Coma Cocktail.

(Excellent for bringing the unconscious back to awareness. Usually found with patients who are found down with no readily known etiology. If it works, then it works. If it doesn't then one can feel free to rule out certain things with safety)

One new friend.

One new man.

One ineffective outlet

About a handful of hyperaware emotions

Kryptonite.

Leave a casual acquaintance out on a shady counter until it ripens into a friend with different experiences and realities. Mix the two together until just wet. Add on old and slightly tart stranger. Once you add him, because you put the new friend in too, the batter will be slightly lumpy. Select your favorite hyperaware emotions and mix them into the bowl. Bake at 1000 degrees and in the last ten minutes of cooking add a pinch of Kryptonite. Careful, don't mix it in, just sprinkle it over the top or it will not back off and leave a sugary crust. Go sit somewhere and play around on the computer in hopes of passing the cooking time.

Fire

The way you walk and talk really sets me off
To a fuller love, child, yes, it does, uh
The way you squeeze and tease, knocks to me my knees
Cause I'm smokin, baby, baby

The way you swerve and curve, really wrecks my nerves
And I'm so excited, child [Yeah], woo, woo
The way you push, push lets me know that you're good
[You're gonna get your wish] Oh, yeah

The Ohio Players

We have a one alarm. 2725 Cottonwood Street. Engine 28, Engine 15, Truck 28, Truck 15, Squad 3, Battalion 1, Battalion 2, Rescue 1 and RAT 9, respond to the report of a one alarm at 2725 Cottonwood Street. Caller reports fire from the second floor. Use fireground channel 2. Engine 28, Engine 15, Truck 28, Truck 15, Squad 3, Battalion 1, Battalion 2, Rescue 1 and RAT 9, respond to the report of a one alarm at 2725 Cottonwood Street. Caller reports fire from the second floor. Use fireground channel 2.

(Feet, Feet, Feet and Breath, Breath, Breath.) Crap, not with this crew. Get the snap all the way up near the neck this time. Damn ponytail. There we go. Glad I didn't have seconds on that cake. **Do you know the water over there or do you need me to look it up?** I know he hears me. Where is the hydrant book? Whose brainy idea is it to keep it way over here? We're going to assume that his silence is not knowing. Cottonwood, Cottonwood. **Hit it off the top side, off Raglin Street, the water is at 2734. We'll be right above it.** Fireground two. Chest strap tight. We'll pull the crosslay hose. Those are mostly two stories, a couple of two A's and two family dwellings right on the street. Should be able to make it with less than 250 feet. If he takes front suction on the hydrant I can keep both of the roughnecks with me. **King, did you hear me? Go in off Raglin to 2734.** Well, how the hell do I know you heard me if you don't answer. If you don't want me riding in charge of your company then you should encourage your little cronies to learn to ride in charge of their own engine. Useless bastards. *Attention all companies responding on Cottonwood, we are getting multiple calls and reports of occupants still inside. Repeat, getting multiple calls and reports of occupants trapped.* Crap. So not what I

want to deal with. **Engine 15, clear.** *Engine 28, notify engine 15 they'll be first in, we are blocked by a train.* Shit. Don't let it be kids. Please, Lord, don't let it be kids. Look at all that smoke. Don't let it be kids. Let me turn this flashlight on now. I'll forget. Don't forget to hit the on-scene button – there we go. Don't sound scared. Think about the rescue. The house really is square. Don't sound scared. **Engine 15 on scene reporting heavy fire from the D side of a 2A single dwelling. Heavy smoke into the street, incoming companies should watch for residents in the street. One occupant obviously trapped. Engine 15 will effect that rescue and begin fire attack. First Arriving truck should assist Engine 15's rescue.** Randy, can you handle that thirty five foot ladder on your own? Get the woman in the window on the A side. Jimmy and I will take the fire line. Did I just give all that information on the fireground and not on main dispatch? Battalion chief will get it out. Ouch, knee. Why is he not pulling the crosslay? I know I said the crosslay. Now you got it, put that crap down. Facepiece, pull straps, air on. Hood up. Damn ponytail. Helmet. Axe. Never a good way to carry this thing. Gloves. **You ready?** If he's so ready then why is he so far behind me? **Jimmy, chock the door and come on.** Crap, my voice amplifier isn't on. **Chock the door and come on.** What the heck is that noise? **Lady, get out of the building. The door is just ahead of you. Get down on your knees.**

I really didn't want it to be kids. **Engine 15, victim approaching the door reports her baby is on the second floor rear, D side.** Damn, how many steps were there? Where is the truck? Hot. Crap. Get lower. Where is Jimmy? Hotter. Crap. Must be this way. Ouch, what was that? Come on – what – **What am I caught on?** Come on. **No, we attack the fire. I know that. We save the baby by putting the fire out. If we find him on the way we rescue. Until then we put out the fire.** There we go. Finally. Trucks on the roof. Sheesh. **Engine 15, is there a truck company on the interior?** Battalion One, Truck 28 is on the roof trying to get you a hole. Truck 15 we're making our way to make entry for search on the rear of the building. Battalion One, what's our progress on the fire? **Engine 15 is at the seat, making fire attack.** Battalion One, we need to get that baby. Hit the ceiling, hit the fire, cool it off. Aww...what is that? Z pattern. Is it getting behind us? Where's my axe? Crap, caught. Come on. **Take the line. Wide open.** My knees are friggin killing me. Shit. Rollover. **Jimmy, it's getting behind us. Come on, help me shift this way. King, more water. More pressure. We need a back up line.** Battalion One- coming to you. We should back out. Was the door that

way? Come on. **Come on.** Aww...come on. I didn't want it to be kids. ***Engine 15 we've located the victim and will make exit off the second floor, B side.*** So little. Three? Four? Where's my axe? Hit the ceiling again, there you go. Shit, where did this come from? Blocked out. Hot. Okay, Lord, I cannot realistically get much lower to the floor than this. Gotta go up. **I see it, were' going up. You hold the stairwell. I'll get the baby out. Mayday, mayday, Mayday, Engine 15 we are cut off by heavy fire on the stairwell. Moving to the attic.** Girl? Boy? I can't tell. Where did Jimmy go? No ladder? Where's the ladder? Crap it's hot up here. ***Engine 15, need a ladder, 2A, the D side. Can anyone account for Jimmy?*** Where's my axe? It's in the walls. It's balloon construction, it's in the walls. This is gonna flash. Not good. So, not good. We've got to get out of here. It can't be kids. ***Where's my ladder?*** I'm coming out. Hot. Shove the baby under your coat. If you open only the bottom two grommets he'll fit. ***Who's on the roof?*** Now that probably sounded scared. *Batallion One- the aerial's coming. Wait on it, Savannah.* Does he not see that this is going to flash. Come on. Are those my knuckles? My ears? Come on. Closer. Quicker. Close enough.

"Got you, Sav. Is this the baby in here? Hand me the baby. Got you, Sav. Good job, girl"

"Is that Jimmy, down there?" I asked. The light from the aerial trucks made me squint. The condensation on the inside of my mask was fogging it up as the cool air of earth's natural atmosphere kissed me all over, undressing me out of a shroud of steam.

Breath, Breath, Breath. Heartbeat, Heartbeat. Heart Beat. Heart Beat. Heart Beat.

"Yeah, it is."

"Girl, I saw you on the news last night. I'm at the hospital watching the news and their funky little live report when I see my best friend spanning the gap between the ledge of the building and a moving aerial ladder," Layla said.

"What?" Gwen asked.

"Your daughter in law. I guess lead surgeons are in the bed by 11:00 p.m."

"They are. Just compensation for years of toil. Savannah, what happened?"

Layla leaned up over the front seat to tell the story for me. “She saved a baby last night. Well, a toddler, at that fire on Cottonwood. Got out right before it flashed. That heat pushed you out didn’t it? Yikes.”

“Savannah?” Gwen asked.

“It was nothing, mom. I got cut off at the stairwell. You know those old, trifling houses over there. Fire was growling at the bottom of the steps so me and Jimmy went up to the attic. Truck had trouble getting a hole and it had gotten in the walls. By then I couldn’t tell what side I was on, but I tell you what, it was hot. That I did know. I looked out and could see that aerial coming toward the window and I went to the mountain.”

“Look at her ears, Mama Gwen. Look like when she used to try and hot comb her own hair,” Layla said laughing. I flipped down the visor and opened up the mirror. I laughed when I saw that it looked exactly like that. The car swerved as Gwen tried to look, too.

“Mama G,” I said, flipping the visor back up, “the road old lady, the road.”

“I got your old lady. I don’t know why Frank lets you keep doing that. You should use that degree your mama died trying to pay for you to earn.”

“Frank doesn’t let me do it. I’m a firefighter because I want to be. Frank doesn’t control that.”

Gwen slowed the car as she passed by her husband’s insurance office. “Well he should. You all would all be better off if you worked somewhere else.”

“What does that mean,” I asked.

Layla leaned forward over the seat again. “What’s wrong, Mama G?”

“Nothing, trying to see if my baby is at work yet,” Gwen said.

“Your hubby still works on Saturday?” Layla asked.

“I’m talking about my grandbaby. Works every other now, with Gary.”

Unsure of what emotion suddenly filled my chest cavity, I was also unsure of how my voice sounded when I said, “Jon? Working? Since when?”

Layla’s head popped up again. “Where’s Daddy Gary’s car?”

“Might be on an errand. Maybe he sent Jon.”

“Since when?”

“I always forget Jon drives now,” Layla said, keeping her head forward between us.

“Since when?”

“I don’t know child,” Gwen twisted her lips, “I think this is the second or third time.”

I was confused, challenged. “What? How come I didn’t know?”

“Oh relax, girl. Savannah, take it from someone who’s been married a really, really long time. Someone who’s done it pretty well. You don’t have to know and run everything. Be on point, at work. At home, lay it down. Sometimes you should just lay it down.”

I shifted into the corner of the front passenger seat. Just like I used to do when I was fifteen. I knew I was pouting. I wanted to pout. Gwen didn’t know enough to say that. I resented the suggestion that I was controlling. Internally fuming I wanted to call Frank immediately. Why in the world wouldn’t he tell me that Jon was working with his father? What would be the point in keeping that a secret?

“Wait till I put this on Hoodwinked. Wonder Woman sticks her big old mouth out when she can’t have her way. The boys on the playground didn’t tell her a secret and she takes her invisible jet and goes home.”

Silence.

I started laughing when Layla put her head on the seat back and crossed her eyes. Gwen started when I started and Layla started when she had trouble uncrossing them.

“Stop, there’s Daddy G’s car,” Layla squealed.

Gwen coasted toward the curb and double checked the time. Jill was already at the coffee shop. Carla would be another fifteen minutes so we had time to stop a minute with Gary. The car however was empty. We sat scanning the block and the soccer field adjacent. I spotted, with relative ease, Jon standing near the bleachers.

“That’s Jon.”

Gwen squinted to focus. So it is. Gary must have sent him for something.”

Layla leaned over to her window, “From the soccer field?”

I didn’t sense it right away but I was shaking my head. Steadily and decisively I was shaking my head. A tingling sensation started on the soles of my feet, distinct and prickly but not itchy. It duplicated itself on my chest and while I didn’t pant and my heart didn’t race I scratched violently at the point where the skin on my neck becomes the skin on my chest. The man standing too close to Jon made me itch.

“Who the hell is that with Jon? I don’t like the way he stands,” Layla said.

Gwen swung her head to me. “Savannah, do you know that man?” It swung back to the field. It swung back to me and Gwen sucked her teeth when she noticed that my shaking head was not in answer to any question asked.

Layla touched my shoulder. “Sav, who is that with Jon?”

Head shaking and silence. I felt my skin flush. The man and Jon stood with their back to the street. After a few seconds he reached up and pulled Jon closer by pulling down on his elbow. He did it slowly. Gwen swung her head back to me, her eyes minimized, her brows making a deep V. “Savannah?”

Head shaking and silence. Gwen popped out of her car door and started across the street. Layla, after a brief hesitation did the same. Her scrubs galloped across the street to catch up with Gwen’s pounding stride.

“Johnny,” Gwen called out as she approached, “It’s Granny.”

I watched as Jon turned to face her. The man dropped his elbow. Jon did a quick drop step as he moved toward his grandmother. He put his arm around her waist and took up a position slightly behind her. Layla gained the curb and stepped up to the man.

“I’m sorry, we haven’t met,” Gwen said. “You are?”

“I’m just someone that knows Jon from around here.”

“Yes, but she asked you your name,” Layla said.

“Look, no harm, no foul. I just know the boy from working over here. At the insurance place. I didn’t mean any disrespect and I’ll be moving on now.”

“I suggest you do,” Gwen said. And then, placing her arm completely around her grandson’s torso, she led him back toward the car. I watched her mouth moving swiftly. She questioned him. What are you doing over here with the car? Where did Granddad send you and does he know where you are now? Where do you know that man from and why was he talking to you like that? Layla opened the car door and popped him in the back of the head as he lowered his lanky body to get in.

Head shaking and silence. I looked at my son out of eyes energized by something that I couldn’t fully describe. Somewhere, somebody was making apple chutney.

Gwen wheeled the car around in a turning radius that I didn’t know her Toyota was even capable of. Jon looked frightened and I couldn’t tell if his fright was caused by us or the man he’d just left. I must have looked frightened, too.

“Ma, don’t worry about it, I’m okay. Nothing’s wrong. I wasn’t doing anything.”

Head shaking and grunting.

Jon rubbed my left shoulder, turned towards him in the front seat, as if it would suppress and appease me in some way.

“You better get to explaining, boy. I know that. You better get to telling Granny who that was. And your Paw Paw better sure as shooting tell me you had permission to be in his car.”

“UmmHm”, Layla echoed from the back seat. “Cause I’m not having it, Jon. You won’t be one of these little punks up on my trauma table. Unless I did the kicking. Yeah, if I do the kicking you can be up there as many times as you want.”

“Hold it.” Jon said, one arm extended in front of him over the seat, and the other behind him to Layla now reclining against the rear seat back with her arms crossed. “I don’t even know that guy. Just because he knows me doesn’t mean that I know him. He just walked up to me out of nowhere. I didn’t steal, Paw Paw’s car. What in the world would make you think I’d take Paw Paw’s car. God, who do you think I am?” Jon lowered his hands and dropped his head and timbre a bit, “Mom?”

Gwen squealed to a stop in front of Gary’s building and she and Layla piled out like police officers moving to a foot chase. Gwen was calling Gary’s name as he approached. He came bustling to the front door with his left index finger raised and his right hand holding his office phone to his ear. I sidled apprehensively out of the car and approached as well.

“I know you weren’t. Adrian, don’t worry about it...I’ll take care of it.”

Gwen and Layla stopped about ten feet short of the door and lit into Gary; for not supervising the boy, asking if he had the car with permission, inquiring about where Gary had sent him and how long he’d been gone, giving descriptions of the mysterious man in John’s periphery.

“Gwen, that was Adrian Givens. He does some work for me from time to time. Moves heavy things for me, helps me clean out files and such. He’s had some problems but he’s doing better now.”

“Well, I didn’t like the way he looked. The baby looked scared. He can’t be safe for Jon to be around. We can’t have him hanging with the wrong crowd”, Gwen said.

Layla stood looking at them, her gaze moving between Gwen and her husband. Gwen kept rolling through her assessment of the situation and her husband’s role in it.

Gary lowered the phone to his side and reached out to place a hand on his wife's shoulder. He looked her directly in the eye and said, "Baby, that's enough. More than enough. In fact, that's all."

Layla sucked her lips back into the frame of her face. Gwen fell silent, knowing she had stepped into a role she should not take with her husband.

"Adrian Givens had a drug problem, a bad parent problem and a host of other stuff. But, like I said, for the past year or so he's been helping me out when he can. He's clean and actually got his GED. For a while, he used my office to study for it.

"Well, why didn't he say that? Why did he act so odd, like he was up to something?"

"Maybe the sight of two angry black women rolling up on him in the park like they were going to go heels on him got to him. You should have seen yourselves getting out of the car just now...and ya'll like me. Jon did have permission to have my car; he was supposed to be going to the hardware store for some cleaning supplies. Now, how about we go and get the boy out of the car so that we can find out why in holy damnation he was in the park. Especially since Adrian thought he was looking to buy drugs since everybody hanging around those bleachers is waiting for a salesman to show up. Adrian recognized Jon and was, according to Adrian, trying to convince him to rethink his mission."

"Savannah?" Gary asked me.

"Hey Daddy G." I answered walking beside him, first in the line back to the car.

Jon looked up at the chorus of angry adults standing outside of his car window. His eyes told me that he knew he was in trouble; I remembered the look from his childhood. Rounded eyes said they were sorry, that they had wronged me personally and that they feared I wouldn't be able to forgive him.

He rolled down the window and said, "Mom, I may have a problem. I can't talk about it now. I need Dad to be here so please, can we talk about it later this afternoon? Please?"

A cacophony erupted. Layla's animated "oh hell no's" buffeted across the top of Gwen's amazed "What? Who does this boy think he is? This isn't a presidential debate, a public hearing....does he think this is some kind of public hearing?" My tears spoke for me what I hadn't been able to say since spotting him in the park. No, before that, since Jill called and told me that Tyler was dead. Dead and gone forever. What, I thought, if my son isn't going to make it?" What if all my muscles and strong will and paramedic powers aren't enough?

“Please, Mom. I have the words to tell you but I need a little more strength. And I don’t want you to yell and cry and get sick so we need Dad there. Besides, Dad will have a plan. Please.”

Jon looked at me and then turned to his Grandfather. Gary put his hand into the car through the half-open window and when Jon handed him the keys, Gary handed them to Gwen.

“Go to breakfast”, he said as he made his way around to the driver’s side of Gwen’s car.

Gwen poked her lips out, usurped. Layla looked aghast and tapped Gwen on the back of her arm before pointing at Gary, as if Gwen hadn’t see him giving orders and preparing to drive off.

“Where is he going?” Layla asked Gwen.

“Go to Breakfast” Gary said again as he disappeared into the car.

Gwen broke her gaze from her husband and turned to Layla and me saying, “Let’s go to breakfast.”

“We have to handle this”, Layla said.

“For now, it’s handled. So,” she said grabbing my arm and turning me to walk up the street to where Jon had parked Gary’s car, “Now we go and eat.”

“Like everything is fine?” I asked.

Gwen looped her arm through mine. “Everything is fine.”

Layla drug her feet across the pavement behind us like she didn’t get chosen for the kickball team.

Episode three – Scene One

It may have been Layla's head wagging that drew Jill's attention to us as we walked through the door. Then again, it might have been the general heaviness of our bodies taking up physical space, more than was hospitable, as we passed from the bright light of morning into the artificial light of the coffee shop. Gwen was the only one smiling. Maybe that was something the Civil Rights Movement taught you to do. Or, maybe surviving it as a young woman in Mississippi teaches you to do it. Jill's over-here dance was answered by Gwen's equally friendly here-we-come hand, the left one as the right hand hadn't let mine go since we'd gotten out of the car. She wasn't dragging me to the table but her connection was, I imagined, much like a seeing eye dog's. Highly suggestive but not unwelcome to those in need. As we got to within ten feet of Jill she started to really examine us. Her eyes shot from Gwen's smile to my head to Layla's feet. Carla sat on the bench next to Jill talking on her cell phone. She seemed to be trying to close a conversation with someone who was not as willing to say goodbye. She twittled spirit fingers at us.

"What?" Jill asked.

"Hey, Lovely", I said leaning in to hug her. I leaned over to Carla and hugged her as she sat. She made the duck mouth motion with her hand and rolled her eyes. "Take your time", I whispered to her.

"What is it?" Jill asked again, sitting down to the table.

No longer able to drag her feet because she was now sitting, Layla began to pop one heel up and down off the ground rapidly. She was a lower body broadcaster of stress and dissatisfaction. If you wanted to know if a date was busting up badly, you watched her legs. If she felt less than sure in the emergency room, she danced a little jig.

"It's Jon, I know it's Jon", Jill reached across the table and took my hands. Gwen placed hers atop ours.

Gwen assumed command and said, "I suppose it was silly of us to think that you wouldn't know the look. Jon, it seems has a problem. One that we suppose revolves around drugs in some way. But, we won't know until this afternoon because he wants to audience with his father present. He's asked for time to gather his strength."

I didn't even know what that meant. Why he didn't feel like he could just tell me, why he needed more strength to talk to his own mother I didn't know. My mother was the one person I didn't need strength to talk to, the one person to whom I could go when I had absolutely nothing left. Good, bad or otherwise she was always a refuge. I had never known a strong refugee. Well, not by the time she arrived at the end anyway. Gwen told the story of encountering Jon to Jill and Carla who had ended the conversation quickly once she sensed imminent danger sidling up to the table with us. Layla kept adding color commentary and as distressed as I felt, it was funny to watch her point at each one of us as she talked. She'd shift forward to the edge of her seat, her leg still only while she animated Gwen's story telling.

"I've been telling you that we've got to do more. These boys are all killing themselves. I don't know what little girls are going to do. Who'll be left for them?" Jill asked all of us.

Carla looked confused so Jill filled her in on what they hadn't gotten to before the three of us arrived. "My son was murdered this past January. Thug life and all of its dangerous entrapments."

"What? You're a teacher, right. I thought you told me you were a teacher."

"I am."

"I guess I never pictured it happening to you guys", Carla said

Layla stood suddenly, "That's what Savannah thought, too. I'm going to get a scone. A raspberry scone. I'm getting you heifers one, too."

"So because she's made she's going to force all of us to eat scones?" Carla asked.

We all laughed at the same time and for a few seconds I forgot that something was after our kids. Layla and Carla were both right. I thought that a nice house and an orderly marriage with enough money for tutors, camps, hobbies and bowling allies would keep us safe, keep us whole. But the streets were everywhere.

Gwen signaled a waitress to come over and said, "Jill's right. We should do something. We can't just sit around and act like we haven't noticed. I don't know what the problem is, but I do know that we can't ever figure that out if we aren't looking. Right now we aren't doing a damned thing about it. Patching them up I guess."

"What in world can we do?" Carla asked.

Layla came back with a basket full of scones and a waitress to take coffee orders. We all ordered lattes except for Gwen who stuck with her trademark Jones Crème Soda. I puckered as

she ordered. She shoved me on the arm. Layla was still standing and shaking a leg while scone crumbs twinkled across the front of her black scrubs.

“Sit down, Karate Jane. There’s no high kicking to be done here.”

Layla lowered the rapidly disappearing breakfast treat to look wide-eyed at Carla. “So, hanging with you off duty makes us real with one another, huh?” Layla said.

“I just know that doctoring and jeet kun do don’t mix. Look at her”, Carla said expanding her gaze to include us, “she wants to beat somebody down behind this but it goes against the oath.”

Silence.

Laughter.

Silence again.

“What if Jon doesn’t make it?” I finally asked aloud.

“Um Um, no, you can’t think like that”, Carla said.

Gwen echoed her response by closing her eyes and shaking her head determinately.

“He’ll make it, has too, got too many of us to support him”, Layla said.

Carla stood up to help the waitress returning with our drinks. “I do think that makes a difference. It was just me with my son. I could only cover so much ground and work and take care of my other kids. I often wonder if I’d had more help if things would be different. Frankly, prison is the best place for my son right now. While he’s in there, the people out here can’t kill him and he can’t do anything stupid to himself.”

Jill, looking up in the air, thought about that for a moment and said, “I suppose if Tyler was here and locked up he would have the potential to change.”

Slurping.

Jill asked Carla, “Was your son hanging with the wrong crowd?”

“Until he became the wrong crowd.”

I tried to picture Jon as the wrong crowd. Were there other parents in the neighborhood for whom Jon was off limits?

“Damn,” Jill said, “I never thought about it like that. Bad crowds come from somewhere.”

Gwen said, “Maybe we should all mentor a child. That would help right. They’ve proven that it helps. We may not all be Carol Brady but-”

“We’re not even Ms. Ellie from Dallas.” Jill said.

“Or,” Carla added, “Rose Kennedy. At least those drunks and liars lived and had careers.”

“Roseanne?” I asked.

Layla asked, “Are there any black, good mothers in history?”

“Coretta King”, Gwen answered with a lilt, as if it was double Jeopardy.

Silence and Slurping.

“Okay, so maybe we should come up with something other than mentoring. Because Coretta, honey, we have fallen short of the glory.”

Jill broke the silence again with laughter, “Carla, you are too silly. Besides, as many kids as some people have nowadays, we couldn’t get to that many of them. I’ve got a girl in my class that has six brothers and sisters. Even if we took that whole family on between us we’d still be one short.”

Layla brightened up, “Maybe we should mentor the mothers. That way they could help all of their kids. Five people here, five mothers, five entire families.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. I wondered how long it would take. I needed for the people affecting Jon to stop right away. Trickle down morality and discipline sounded like it took a while. My friends, my family, went on talking about what you might teach a young mother about finances, setting house rules and sticking to them, cooking healthy meals, educating yourself and your kids, giving children coping skills and finding time for yourself as a mother. It wouldn’t fit. All of that teaching and guiding wouldn’t fit into the time it takes to gun down a son, a brother, a young father.

“Or we could just beat the crap out of bad moms under the cover of night and expect them to shape up”, I said looking directly into their faces over their coffee cups.

“Savannah, you are too silly” Jill said.

The other women laughed to complement my smile. Gwen reached over and rubbed my back.

Scene Two

January 22, 2006 1:40 A.M.

There is a profundity of emotion that only you can access. As I lay in bed, every light in the house off, the creaking night-noises of the house traveling through the vents, this profundity has moved me from my bed. I was half worried, for the six second trip down the hall that I wouldn't find you here. That in your place would be the emptiness that I have secretly worried about finding ever since Tyler turned up dead in a ball field with no scrotum; an odd symbol of all that would never become of Jill's only child. The image has, at times, startled me awake at the firehouse, it has coded transient but pronounced loathing for young illegal boy-men on street corners. But you are here. You are here lying in this queen sized bed in a slight crescent shape, a long sliver of curved brown flesh inhaling and exhaling with the fluidity of careless youth. Whatever it was that you can't tell me hasn't kept you from sleeping like you did when you were only months old. Except for the additional six feet you look like you did when I could hold you entirely in my arms. Standing here at the foot of this bed I am worried about you. You are asleep and safe. Look at you? How in the world did we get to this day? You're cute, too. Handsome and I can see why the house phone is always ringing, riddled with the sound of seeking-sultry voices filled with enough nerve to ask for you despite me. Used to be they'd eye you indirectly and scuttle off rather than test me. Now, I don't mean so much to them, maybe you. It makes me laugh. It makes me cry. You make me cry. Whatever it is, whatever you can't tell me can't be good. When did I become someone you can't talk to? How many secrets are rolling through that body? When I think of how much time we don't spend together anymore...there could be a lot of secrets. How much would I do for you? Just handsome. Makes me proud. And when I see you hold the door for someone at the grocery I am warm. Just last week when I came home for work and found that breakfast sandwich you'd made for me before you went to school, I knew it wasn't leftovers from your own rushed breakfast, I knew. Mommies know. What have I done to you? Are you scared? Are you sick? Do the police know something that I don't? Is she pregnant? Who is she? What wouldn't I do for you? What can I do for you?

January 22, 2006 3:30 A.M.

Do you always sleep facing each other? I don't think I've ever seen you sleep before. I've seen you nap, but that's different and usually I'm waking you up. You look like kids, really. I don't really know any other way to tell you this. I thought about talking to you, telling you face to face. I know, "a man looks another man in the eye". "Never do anything you'll have to lie about or be ashamed of. If you do something that someone else won't agree with, that's different. You can admit to that." But, do you know how hard it is to tell your parents that you're pretty sure you're hooked on drugs. Ecstasy and marijuana. How do you tell the best parents that any of your friends know that you let them down? I can't be you, mom. I've tried but I don't think you know how hard it is to be you, yourself. In fact, too much you makes you panic. I couldn't take one more person asking me if I knew how fast my father ran the forty. I know. I frigging know. That's why I quit. I wasn't ever going to be you. I love you. I love you so much and I try to do right. I try hard but it seems like the harder I try the worse I do. Can't win for losing. Can't win for winning parents. My friends are right, you do kind of look like black Ken and Barbie. Mom doesn't even disturb her covers. What am I supposed to do? I tried to fix it. I did. I tried to just quit. Mom would just quit if it were her. And I can't seem to do even that. I know when I leave this letter, when you read it tomorrow morning, you'll cry. Now, how am I supposed to face that? It's not your fault. If I could reverse it I would. I just want to go back to the days when you would swing me in a circle. Remember that? Dad would say I was too big, but you'd swing me, anyway. I remember when we used to go bowling, all of us. Auntie Jill and Auntie Layla. Granny and Paw Paw. Why did we stop that? You guys would race me back to the car in the dark. I know I told you I was too old for that, that I didn't like it anymore. I'm pretty sure now that I lied about that. I want to race you. I want to beat you. I used to run so hard that I couldn't control me head. It was big back then. God, I remember that feeling. My heart would pound and my legs felt like they could go forever. I used to want to watch the muscles flex as I ran but I couldn't get my head forward. It felt like any minute I might fall down. Dad behind me, screaming for me to run harder. When we'd get to the car; all that panting. Trying to talk through my breath. One day. I'm going to be even faster than you, mom. One day. Remember that? I hope you don't cry too hard when you read it.

January 22, 2006 6:30 A.M.

Addicted? A continuum.

One year, started with marijuana

High In the house? While Breaking curfew?

Ecstasy - E,

"I liked it, it felt good"

*"I felt up, like I could do anything and do it
forever"*

this doesn't come naturally for him. Why not?

Pressure to perform, implicit. Our expectations?

Then, now?

"I think I need rehab" maybe we're early enough

"I'm scared of how much I want it."

Danger in obtaining. To what lengths does he go?

Secondary threats to safety? Where is he getting

money for this. No job - hasn't been getting any

money from home? Crime to support. Can't see it,

don't rule out though.

Side effects; muscle rigidity, others? Layla clarity.

Get him a physical - time for dental

N.A. Group for problem solving solutions.

Depression or other co-committant things?

Sav-depression??? Counseling. Guilt

Private pay rehab....cost? where? How soon can we get him in?

What do we do with him in the meantime?

Seclusion?

Stay with mom and dad until admit?

Schoolwork - ways to keep him getting credit while gone.

~~Outpatient~~ Never works

Drug test him weekly till admit - consequences

Sav-this isn't punishment can't approach in this way

Sav (cont)

How many times have you let him off hook after I decided

Shoes

Confiscated clothing

*Deadline for getting job - past=no money
from home*

Don't reward bad behavior - explain enabling.

*Jill - enabling Savannah, adding something
to Sav.*

Counseling for Jill - asap

*Apartment/house for Jill. It's been a year, for
the most part.*

7:33 A.M. No panic attack - what up with that.

January 21, 2006

Dear Mom and Dad,

I wrote this out because I don't know how to say out loud what I have to say. I don't want you to interrupt me. I just want you to let me get it all out. So I need you to promise that you won't interrupt me.

I started using marijuana at a party about a year ago. It's not your fault. You guys talked to me over and over again about drugs and what's wrong with them but for some reason, that day when I was there and someone offered it to me I couldn't say no. I didn't want to say no. I had seen some guys doing it before and they all looked like they were having a good time, like they were chilling, like it really just added something to the good time they were already having. I wanted to feel like that, too so I tried it.

I liked it. There is always marijuana to be found and I discovered that it was pretty easy to get my hands on some. So get my hands on some I did. Sometimes every weekend. Sometimes I would go periods of time when I didn't use anything. But then one time, at a party someone had some E. I tried not to use it but they were all calling me soft and a mama's boy. I know you guys don't know anything about this but I really didn't want to hear it. I hear it all the time, how I'm just not down enough. We live over here in this subdivision with dad's car and stuff. I never have the shoes that they have or the clothes. I always have to come home and do chores and there's always someone checking my homework and stuff. I just didn't want to hear it that day and so I tried it. I was just starting to get in and I didn't want to mess that up. I tried it and I liked it. It made me feel like I could do anything and do it forever.

Couple weeks ago, I started doing some stuff on the internet, you know looking at what makes a person an addict. I think I need to go to rehab. I don't know if I'm addicted, I think I can stop using it but I read on Myspace.com that a lot of addicted people think that. I hate the way that it makes me feel when I come down, E that is, but I love going up and staying up. When I'm up there I count. I'm in and I don't have to think about all the things I do wrong. I feel like such a failure. My grades are never good enough. I see you, mom, working at not getting sick when I bring home bad

grades or miss curfew or say one of the stupid things a I say around the house. Dad, I can tell I let you down when I do a halfway job on the stuff you give me to do. It seems like every time I try to do something that will make me a real live Jordan, the son of Savannah and Frank Jordan, I fail. When I went out for football they were surprised that Frank Jordan's boy didn't run a faster forty. Everybody remembered how fast you ran it in college. When I got that C on last semester's research project my English teacher said she was surprised that Savannah Jordan had allowed it. I embarrassed you and me that day. It was just two years ago that I was able to outrun mom. She still leg presses more than me. Granny's in the news all the time and PawPaw has his own commercials and billboards. Sometimes I just feel shitty. I don't feel shitty when I'm up but when I come down I always feel shitty-er. Sorry about saying shitty.

Even though I think I can go without it, it scares me a little how much I want it when I decide I want it. Sometimes I lie to you mom about why I need some money and stuff so that I can buy some. A couple of times I've found money in your uniform pants or something and I take it. When Dad told me that I couldn't have any more allowance until I got a job I really got scared, wondering how I was going to get some E or weed when I wanted it. Oh yeah, I think I'm lazy too, but the internet said that the E may be causing that. I already knew the weed did it, you guys told me that. I don't want to let Mom and auntie Jill down. I want to be what Tyler wasn't allowed to be but I think I just keep messing it up. I'm still tripping on Ty not coming home with Auntie Jill. That was my dog and now he's gone. I didn't feel so whack with him around. I can't seem to do right but it's not because I don't want to. I think I'm just all messed up and I don't want to die like Ty. Ty was my boy and I don't want to get shot like he did. I thought that working for PawPaw would help, that it would keep me busy and out of trouble. But, I seem to be good at finding trouble and I don't want to keep doing it. I'm kinda glad you all know now and I hope that one day I can be a Jordan worthy of the name. I want Frank and Savannah Jordan to be proud of me.

I kind of owe a friend some money, too. More than I have and more than I could have asked for. But, if I don't give it to him then his dad is going to ask and I'm

going to get him in trouble too. I'm not in any danger like someone going to hurt me or anything. I think I've been pretty lucky about not getting hurt on some of the times when I was trying to get some. One time mom's truck flew right past me as I was getting out of friends car to buy. I just knew you had seen me. I couldn't believe it when I could tell you didn't. I would have thought you could see me everywhere I was, mom. That's what you said anyway. That part was a joke. I didn't do that right either.

Please don't feel too bad. I just want you guys to love me even though I'm not what you want me to be. I promise I won't keep embarrassing you, I just think I need a little help to get off this path I'm on. I will try to answer as many questions as I can but I don't know if I'll be able to answer all of them. It took me a while to come up with these answers.

I love you and want to be a good son.

Jonathon Jordan.

January 22, 2006 7:15 A.M.

"Did you know about this?"

"I didn't either. How could we have missed this?"

"No, I'm not ignoring the fact that you said this already. I know you suspected it."

"I realize he's been positive before, but that was that one time. Did you have any idea that he'd keep using? If you did know, then why in the hell didn't you do something about it."

"So now it's my fault. I go against one of your decisions and this makes my son an addict."

"Our son. Sorry."

"How long have you been done reading this?"

"That's *one* of the points."

"Well, that's what I'm hearing. I'm hearing, "Savannah, you made your son a junkie. You're a bad mother for loving your son and not wanting him to be unhappy and you made him a junkie.""

"My voice is down. He says he's a junkie, I didn't say it."

"Might be addicted. A junkie. Same difference. I know this, Frank."

"Like there's more than one version to know. Please. Drug addiction, Christ Frank, drug addiction."

"I don't give a damn about how it looks in your office. We're talking about our son. This isn't a patient. Jill was right."

"No, we don't need to talk about that, too. It's my friend. What could you possibly have to say."

"No, I'm not okay. We've got to do something fast. Let's get him up."

"Plan. Always planning. You've planned us right into a drug problem."

"Well, then what are we supposed to do, Frank? Hmm?"

"I'm listening."

Episode Four – Scene One

1242:17 StarCarla: so, is this how you plan on spending your entire day?

1242:35 Wonderwoman: Yes.

1242:45 StarCarla: Well then I'm really worried about you. You've been hoodwinking hard since late last night it looks like? Cool?

1242:53 Wonderwoman: Yeah, Fretting187 engaged me first anyway.

1243:01 Star Carla: CNN's report on drug violence in Atlanta?

1243:01 Wonderwoman: She had it coming.

1243:01 Wonderwoman: like it's the only city suffering from drug violence. little white hamlets all over America aren't dealing with drug violence.

1243:12 StarCarla: They do make it seem like black cities are the only one.

1243:18 Wonderwoman: Only ones they like to show. Only ones I care about.

1243:40 StarCarla: You keep talking about forcing mothers to do better. I dunno... Forcing. Possible?

1243:48 Wonderwoman: Yep.

1244:05 StarCarla: Ohh. serious? Who are you?

1244:11 Wonderwoman: I'm wonderwoman, black mama extraordinaire. Just this morning I forced fretting187 to think about her position.

1244:16 StarCarla: and this means what

1244:25 Wonderwoman: power. Potential. I know where you're going. I don't know really.

1244:38 StarCarla: I know that what you do for a living makes you able to be up and typing from 2AM on, but what in the world do you think that Fretting187 does with her life?

1244:44 Wonderwoman: Pigeon hole black folk I guess.

1244:51 StarCarla: LOL. We gotta get our community back. reclaim them from these fools acting like a lack of money gives you some right to be a fool. I wanna go back to the days when black men wore hats when they went out. Only so much foolishness when you wearing a fedora.

1245:15 Wonderwoman: ????

1245:18 Michael Jackson?

1245:22 StarCarla: Okay, more foolishness than I originally thought. We are responsible for our own. We'll tend to our men (they're not boys) and you let us be. If we whip em in the store, quit calling child protective services. If you steal em out of my house now, they'll be

stealing out of yours later. You said that last night, or this morning rather, at 0415:58. I pasted it in. Got CNN's hoodwinked page open, too so I can see if Fretting finds her way back.

1245:28 Wonderwoman: she probably saw it and just didn't answer. But, let me know if you see her put something up before I do. Layla and I called ourselves hanging last night. Like we did in college. Back then we talked about boys and clothes and other hateful women. Now we talk about anarchy and black on black crime. We's all growed up now.

1245:52 What do you think about ladydoc's opinion?

1246:20 Wonderwoman: You know Layla. All fire and brimstone in the beginning. Later, she's all theory and planning.

1246:22 StarCarla: Plans are good. Finding ways to get people to stop bothering your kids. To stop enticing them.

1246:41 Wonderwoman: No time for plans. Emergency status is here now.

1246:44 StarCarla: ???

1247:27 StarCarla: Emergency Status. You're scared?.

1247:30 StarCarla: You still there?

1247:33 Wonderwoman: Yeah, I was thinking about that for a moment. I need for people to stop enticing my boy now. Not scared anymore.

1247:46 StarCarla: ??

1247:58 Wonderwoman: I had an idea the other day.

1248:10 StarCarla: at the coffeehouse.

1248:19 Wonderwoman: I'm mad more than scared. Tired of excuses. What wouldn't you do to have your son back at home? Healthy, maturing, wiser.

1248:24 StarCarla: Whew..... Girl. Gun and drug violence increased in Atlanta by 26% in 2002. I'm scared.

1248:36 Wonderwoman: well, get over it. Can't act till you do.

1248:42 StarCarla: What in the world can I do for my boy now?

1251:52 Wonderwoman: Hoodwink his story, what happens to him up there. Don't let people be comfortable in no knowing.

1252:14 StarCarla: that simple?

1252:47 Wondewoman: simple start. Kinda like fair warning. Young David will be alright.

1253:06 StarCarla: patients coming in. Tyler will be, too. TTYL

1248:59 Wonderwoman: that's Jill's boy.

Episode Four- Scene two

"You know that when we were all growing up, you couldn't hear anything important till someone beat it into you. Folks are hard headed nowadays. You have to get their attention first," Layla said.

Layla wasn't taking me seriously. People were bothering my best thing, defense is genetically your first reaction. Jill was sipping a mocha and looking very frightened. Layla on the other hand looked as hale as I had ever seen her. I had been bringing her traumas and sick people all night so I knew she was at least as tired as I. But as she sat with her knee bouncing she looked like she's just had the best date of her life. Like she'd been full blown doing it for hours, rested and then had chocolate. She was rosy and animated. Her eyes made clean connections and breaks with each one of us as she rolled through some points about how beating down bad people would definitely make her feel better. She never thought about actually making it work.

"Think about that woman you brought in last night whose son had broken his leg and collarbone when a car hit him outside. It's February, why is he outside? Why is he outside without her? Why is he up at 3:00 am? I bet if somebody put a whipping on her she'd sleep a little bit lighter and put her kids to be earlier. It may take a couple of sessions, some of us need more reinforcement before we come to understand," I said.

"Reinforcement?" Jill asked.

"Re-In-force-ment," I answered.

"Worked when my Daddy did it," Layla said. "Getting caught coming in after curfew, and the beat down that went with it reinforced the fact that doing it again was a bad idea. Who else is going to make this crap painful? Hell, inconvenient in anyway?"

Carla sat her muffin back on the tray and crossed her hands in front of her. Her head tilted to the side and she looked like she had just solved her Rubik's cube for the first time. "You know what? Nothing was ever uncomfortable for my son. Juvenile sentencing; that was like a day outside without chores. And that little local juvenile jail, the one where they can go to school was a vacation. He didn't have any chores; he didn't have to get up early. Nothing. When he got home and I had rules and responsibilities he looked at me like I was crazy."

"See," I said.

"What did you want them to do, Carla? String him up in the public square. Water torture?" Jill asked.

Carla turned to face Jill who was sitting next to her, "Yep. All that and more. Something, enough of something to say that stealing from people is wrong and if you decide to do it again, then you've decided big – bigger than these consequences that are already big. Maybe then the potential benefits of doing dirt just won't seem worth it."

"If your son doesn't do it then the chances of my son doing it go down," I said.

Layla turned to Jill, "Somebody approached Tyler. Somebody drew him in. I know there's always been an underground, somebody has always done dirt. But unless Jon went asking - unless Tyler went to sniffing around for himself, then who had the right to bring it to him?"

"Maybe Tyler did go looking purposefully. And, once he got inside because of the asking, maybe he became that guy that seeks out others. If my son was selling, I doubt seriously he was asking about people's intent, investigating their tendency for addiction and basing his sales decision on ethical best practices," Jill said.

"Then Tyler should get beat down, too," I announced.

The comment took us all a bit of guard. I imagined that even I looked like I couldn't believe I'd said it. But I did. And after I did, they all laughed.

Stomping away to the bathroom, a fake laugh still reeling in my ears, I didn't notice Carla walking behind me, clutching her purse and cramming the last bit of a Layla -mandated scone into her mouth.

When the door didn't make noise hitting the jamb I turned around. Carla stepped up to me and placed her hands on either side of my face. "Whatever it is you're thinking about doing, don't. You've got too much to lose and too many resources to think it's over."

I tried not to cry. It didn't work. "He's my favorite part. My best thing."

"I know," she said. I believed her.

"But, if he isn't thinking right, all the beatdowns in the world won't work. You'll convince him and then you won't need anything else."

I stepped into her and cried on her shoulder. Just enough to take the edge off, a pressure relief valve for line fast tamping down tight. When I was done, she had let me cry as long as I needed to, just like I was used to doing with Layla and Jill, I stepped back and looked at her. She was doing that feminine thing again.

"Come on. Get your blind, black behind to the table before the posse comes looking for us."

"I'm not blind, I asymmetriphobic," I said, thinking about the short list of things I wouldn't do for my son.

"Girl," Carla said, shifting a hand to her hip, "What is the damn difference?"

Episode Four – Scene Three

I was studying them too closely. Jill, though driving, was the first to notice. I stared, first at Jill in profile, then at Layla in the back seat. Which one would go with me?

Jill seemed the most natural choice; somewhere in there, despite her guilt and sadness she was angry. The trial for Tyler's murderer was set to begin in a bit less than one month and the boy while not pleading self defense outright, was claiming that he was murdering proactively, that had he not done so, Tyler would have murdered him. The prosecutor had a witness that would testify that this was not the case, but Jill couldn't understand or accept that the prosecutor had only gotten one. We had been told that there were several but that most of the several wouldn't be credible in court. In defending Tyler against such a statement they would open him up to several others that would fail to make him look less atavistic and criminally intent. Jill loved me, loved my son and would, I thought, want to help me keep him safe. But, on occasional Tuesday Taco nights Jill seemed resentful. She would make her tacos and cross over the threshold of the breakfast nook to eat in the kitchen; not separate from us, just distant from us. At Jon's jokes she would laugh a little less heartily. Sometimes she would avert her gaze when he would lean over to smell the patchouli I had put into my hair when I washed it or when he made me stand with my back to his so that someone could measure just how much taller he was than me. I think Jon sensed it, too. Occasionally, he would call to Jill and ask her to do the measuring, as if he'd grown since the last Tuesday Taco night. Most often she would wave off the task and with the flick of her wrist, swallowing something. Something that appeared to be less filling than touching Jonathan while managing to taste great. Would she avenge Tyler with me? A witherer by nature could she do it if she wanted to? What was her kryptonite?

Layla believed in action. She loved me and loved my son. Jon talked to her unlike he did to anyone else. She was his righteous Auntie, the one who refused to dress information up in pretty packages because pretty packages, she believed, you never used. When he disrespected himself, she disrespected him so that he would know what it looked like. After he'd cut her lawn once a week in the summer time she would drink soda with him on the deck and curse him like a grown man for bad grades and missed appointments. I thought about how she cried when I told her that Jon admitted to a drug problem. She was still crying when we got home and she called Jon to her, wrapped her arms around him and held him there, her face unloading torrents of water into his chest. "I am so angry with you," she told him despite

the intermittent failure of her voice to crest heaving sobs. I moved to intervene but he accepted her anger with his own tears. They sprinkled into her hair to dry there. Surely she would stand with me.

Between my attempts to look at them on the inside, I thought about Frank. What I sought to heal in Jon, according to my husband, I only succeeded in weakening. We agreed that a man needed to know how to handle his own life, his own decisions. How would he watch for the ropes in trees, the ones waiting to ensnare him, if we didn't train him? Both Frank and I believed in the value of guiding hands. For Frank though, those hands pushed. For me, in Frank's opinion of the matter, those hands pulled. "You're a fixer," Frank would tell me, "when you should be a facilitator." Size up, save lives, cover exposures, confine the fire, extinguish the fire, salvage, overhaul, ventilate; the firefighting formula. Fires are not coaxed out. You don't reason with them. You run into the smoky building carrying any and every tool you think you might need; crawl on your belly until you see the orange glow, and then you unload as much water as you can on it. When it's out, you take an axe, a ceiling hook or a saw and you rip out anything that might be smoldering under the surface, that might rekindle. You apply pressure and rip it out.

What wouldn't Frank do for Jon? Could I afford to find out? What would happen to us if Frank's list was shorter than mine? How could I get over knowing that? But, Frank and I agreed on outcomes even if we disagreed on tactics. This had to be good for something, it had to carry us a long way.

My grandmother tried to raise and protect her boys but the world wouldn't let her. Her mother before her failed to keep Night Riders from looting her home of the only things worth anything. Her husband, soon after, flitted about on wind; the strange fruit of ex-plantation trees after the sons she managed to keep and recover were plucked from her grasp before ripe. They didn't hang her husband there, but in sending the horse off without him he left my grandmother's mother alone to hold the world at bay, to hide her own sons. As my mother used to tell the story, it wasn't the day that he hung himself that she stopped loving him, completely as if someone flipped a switch. No, my grandmother's mother wanted to join him up there. Her oldest boy violated and in the lake because he dared to work and be proud was cause enough to want to die herself. She had planned to do it the next day, waiting only to prepare things for the two daughters. It was that next day, when considering the white men

that would be back to try for the other two proud sons as well, that his air in her heart hissed away. Any son saving to be done had to be done by her, an onus impressed on the womb.

"I was serious about what I said."

"What did you say?" Layla asked.

Jill swerved the car. "Well, you can't be."

"I want one of you to help me. Both of you."

"It's ridiculous. You can't go around harming people."

Layla caught up with us. "Oh, that. Oh, girl. Oh no."

I don't know that we have to harm anyone. We just need to warn them. You said it yourself Layla, people need to be made to hear", I said.

"It's against the law", Layla said laughing, my suggestion the height of the ridiculous.

"Jill, if you and I were reversed, if you'd watched my son die and been trying to save yours, would you do it? You'd do it."

"I'd want to." She admitted. "But I wouldn't. Sweets, you are no good to Jon in jail, or in some asylum somewhere once they decide that your grief and worry made you crazy. Crazy-er."

"It isn't for Jon. It's not for Tyler. You want to do this for you", Layla said. "You can't save Jon if he's hell bent on not being saved, which I don't think he is at all. It bothers you. What else in your entire life have you not been able to control? You can't spray water on this one, honey and watch it go out."

"So I should just let these low-life ingrates ruin my son. I should just let the streets get him like they got Carla's boy.

Jill took one hand off the steering wheel, picking up my hand instead. "It isn't just the low-lives, Savannah. Jon plays a role in this. You and Frank and all of us play some role. You could knock every drug dealer in the world over the head and it might not keep Jon from using. He isn't using for them, as a result of them. Jon's using as a result of Jon, too."

Our conversation moved to exercising as if I had never mentioned anything about affecting those affecting my son. By the time we made it to my driveway, where my son opened the front door to greet us, I was resolute. The sound of horse hooves tramping made me lightheaded and when I hugged him I tried to cover as much of his frame as I could.

