

Before
You
Suffocate
Your
Own
Fool Self

Danielle Evans

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

New York

2010

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I'm sick of mediating with your worst self
On behalf of your better selves

I am sick
Of having to remind you
To breathe
Before you suffocate
Your own fool self

—DONNA KATE RUSHIN, *"The Bridge Poem"*

I do not believe our wants
have made all our lies holy.

—AUDRE LORDE, *"Between Ourselves"*

Virgins

Me and Jasmine and Michael were hanging out at Mr. Thompson's pool. We were fifteen and it was the first weekend after school started, and me and Jasmine were sitting side by side on one of Mr. Thompson's ripped-up green-and-white lawn chairs, doing each other's nails while the radio played "Me Against the World." It was the day after Tupac got shot, and even Hot 97, which hadn't played any West Coast for months, wasn't playing anything else. Jasmine kept complaining that Michael smelled like bananas.

"Sunscreen," Jasmine said, "is some white-people shit. That's them white girls you've been hanging out with, got you wearing sunscreen. Black people don't burn."

Never mind that Michael was lighter than Jasmine and I was lighter than Michael, and really all three of us burned. Earlier, when Jasmine had gone to the bathroom, I'd let Michael rub sunscreen gently into my back. I guess I smelled like bananas, too, but I couldn't smell anything but the polish and I didn't think she could, either. Jasmine was on about some other stuff.

"You smell like food," Jasmine said. "I don't know why you wanna smell like food. Ain't nobody here gonna lick you because you smell like bananas. Maybe that shit works in Bronxville, but not with us."

"I don't want you to lick me," Michael said. "I don't know where your mouth has been. I know you don't never shut it."

"Shut up," I said. They were my only two real friends and if they fought I'd've had to fix it. I turned up the dial on Mr. Thompson's radio, which was big and old. The metal had deep scratches on it, and rust spots left by people like us, who didn't watch to see whether or not we'd flicked drops of water on it. It had a good sound, though. When the song was over they cut to some politician from the city saying again that it was a shame talented young black people kept dying like this, and it was time to do something about it. They'd been saying that all day. Mr. Thompson got up and cut off the radio.

"You live like a thug, you die like a thug," he said, looking at us. "It's nothing to cry over when people wake up in the beds they made."

He was looking for an argument, but I didn't say nothing, and Jasmine didn't, either. Part of swimming in Mr. Thompson's pool was that he was always saying stuff like that. It still bothered me swimming at the city pool, which had closed for the season last weekend, and before that had been closed for a week after someone got beat up there. When it was open it was crowded and dirty from little kids who peed in it, and was usually full of people who were always trying to start something. People like Michael, who had nothing better to do.

"I'm not crying for nobody," Michael told Mr. Thompson. "Tupac been dead to me since he disses B.I.G." He looked up and made some bootleg version of the sign of the cross, like he was talking about God or something. He must've seen it in a movie.

Mr. Thompson shook his head at us and walked back to the lawn chair where he'd been reading the paper. He let it crinkle loudly when he opened it again, like even the sound of someone else reading would make us less ignorant.

Jasmine snorted. She lifted Michael's sweatshirt with the tips of her thumb and index finger so she didn't scratch her still-drying polish and pulled out the pictures he had been showing us before Mr. Thompson came over—photos of his latest girlfriend, a brunette with big eyes and enormous breasts.

lying on a bed with a lot of ruffles on it.

~~“You live like a white girl, you act like a white girl,”~~ said Jasmine, frowning at the picture and making her voice deep like she was Mr. Thompson.

“She’s not white,” said Michael. “She’s Italian.”

Jasmine squinted at the girl’s penny-sized pink nipples. “She look white to me.”

“She’s Italian,” said Michael.

“Italian people ain’t white?”

“No.”

“What the fuck are they, then?”

“Italian.”

“Mr. Thompson,” Jasmine called across the yard, “are Italian people white?”

“Ask the Ethiopians,” said Mr. Thompson, and none of us knew what the hell he was talking about so we all shut up for a minute.

The air started to feel cooler through our swimsuits, and Michael got up, putting his jeans on over his wet swim trunks and pulling his sweatshirt over his head. I followed Jasmine into the house, where we took turns changing in the downstairs bathroom. It was an old house, like most of the ones in her part of town, but Mr. Thompson kept it nice: the wallpaper was peeling a little, but the bathroom was clean. The soap in the soap dish was shaped like a seashell, and it seemed like we were the only ones who ever used it. On our way out we said good-bye to Mr. Thompson, who nodded at us and grunted “Girls”; then, harsher, at Michael: “Boy.”

Michael rolled his eyes. Michael wasn’t bad. Mostly I thought he hung out with us because he was bored a lot. He needed somebody to chill with when the white girls he was fucking’s parents were home. We didn’t get him in trouble as much as his boys did. We hung out with him because we figured it was easier to have a boy around than not to. Strangers usually thought one of us was with him, and they didn’t know which, so they didn’t bother either of us. When you were alone, men were always wanting something from you. We even wondered about Mr. Thompson sometimes, or at least we never went swimming at his house without Michael with us.

Mr. Thompson was retired, but he used to be our elementary school principal, which is how he was the only person in Mount Vernon we knew with a swimming pool in his backyard. We—and everybody else we knew—lived on the south side, where it was mostly apartment buildings, and if you had a house, you were lucky if your backyard was big enough for a plastic kiddie pool. The bus didn’t go by Mr. Thompson’s house, and it was a twenty-minute walk from our houses even if we walked fast, but it was nicer than swimming at the city pool. We were the only ones he’d told could use his pool anytime.

“It ’s ’cause I collected more than anyone else for the fourth-grade car drive, when we got the computers,” I said. “He likes me.”

“Nah,” Jasmine said, “he don’t even remember that. It’s ’cause my mom worked at the school at those years.”

Jasmine’s mom had been one of the lunch ladies, and we’d gone out of our way to pretend not to know her, with her hairnet cutting a line into her broad forehead, her face all covered in sweat. Even when she got home she’d smell like grease for hours. Sometimes if my mother made me a bag lunch I’d split it with Jasmine so we didn’t have to go through the lunch line and hear the other kids laugh. At school, Mr. Thompson had been nicer to Jasmine’s mother than we had. We felt bad for letting Mr. Thompson make us nervous. He was the smartest man either of us knew, and probably he was just being nice. We were not stupid, though. We’d had enough nice guys suddenly look at us the wrong

way.

~~My first kiss was with a boy who'd said he'd walk me home and a block later was licking my mouth. The first time a guy had ever touched me—like touched me *there*—I was eleven and he was sixteen and a lifeguard at the city pool. We'd been playing chicken and when he put me down he held me against the cement and put his fingers in me, and I wasn't scared or anything, just cold and surprised. When I told Jasmine later she said he did that to everyone, her too. Michael kept people like that out of our way. People had used to say that he was fucking one of us, or trying to, but it wasn't like that. He was our friend, and he'd moved on to white girls from Bronxville anyway. It was like he didn't even see us like girls sometimes, and that felt nice because mostly everybody else did.~~

Michael's brother Ron was leaned up against his car, waiting for him at the bottom of Mr. Thompson's hill. The car was a brown Cadillac that was older than Ron, who graduated from our high school last spring and worked at Radio Shack. People didn't usually notice the car much because they were too busy looking at Ron and he knew it. He was golden-colored, with curly hair and doll-baby eyelashes and the kind of smile where you could count all of his teeth. Jasmine always said how fine he was, but to me he looked like the kind of person who should be on television, not someone you actually wanna talk to. He must've still been mad at Pac, too, or he was just tired of hearing him on the radio, because he was bumping Nas from the tape deck. Michael hopped in the front seat and started to wave bye to us.

"Man," Ron said, cuffing him on the back of his head. "You got two cute girls here, and you ain't even gonna try to take 'em with you? I thought I raised you better than that."

"I'm meeting people at the Galleria. You coming?" Michael called.

"Who's gonna be there?" Jasmine asked.

"Me, Darius, Eddie . . . prolly some other people."

"Nuh-uh," Jasmine said. "You're cool, but your boy ain't."

"What 's wrong with my boy?" Michael asked, grinning.

Jasmine made a *tsk* sound. "He ignorant, that's what."

"Damn son," said Ron as he walked back to the driver's side. "Your whole crew can't get no play." He got in, slammed the car door, and did a U-turn. On his way past us he leaned out the window and called, "You get tired of messing with these fools, you come down to the mall and see *me*," then rolled up the amber window and drove off.

Jasmine's problem was that she had lost her virginity to Michael's friend Eddie four months before. He told her he would go with her afterward but instead he went with Cindy Jackson. We saw them all over the city all summer, holding hands. It drove Jasmine crazy. Jasmine liked to pretend no one knew any of this, even though JASMINE FUCKED EDDIE AND NOW SHE'S PRESSED!! had been written in both the boys' and girls' bathrooms at school for months. Cindy wrote it in both places. I told Jasmine Cindy was probably real familiar with the boys' bathroom.

"The only difference between that girl and the subway," I said, "is that everybody in the world hasn't ridden the subway."

I thought Jasmine would feel better, but instead of laughing she sniffled and said, "He left me for some trashy bitch." After that I just let her cry.

On our way to Jasmine's house, she said, "I'm sad about Tupac, a little. It is sad. You can't ever do anything. I bet you if I got famous, somebody would kill me too."

"What the hell would you get famous for?" I asked.

"I'm just saying, if I did."

"Sure," I said. "You'd be just like Tupac."

"I'm just saying, Erica, you never know. You don't know what could happen. You don't know how much time you got."

Jasmine could be melodramatic like that, thinking because something bad happened somewhere something bad would happen to you. I remembered when Tupac had went to jail, and Jasmine cried because she said we could get arrested too, and I said, "*For what?*", but it didn't matter, she just kept crying. Mostly to make her feel better, we had bought IT'S A SET UP SO KEEP YA HEAD UP T-shirts at the mall. My mother screamed when she saw us wearing them.

"*Setup*," she said. "Y'all take that crap off. Keep believing everything these rap stars tell you. I'm telling you, the minute a man says someone set him up for anything, you run, because he's about to set you up for something."

There were a whole lot of men we were supposed to stay away from according to my mother: rap stars, NBA players, white men. We didn't really know any of those kinds of people. We only knew boys like Michael who freestyled a little but mostly not well, who played ball violently like someone's life was at stake, or else too pretty, flexing for the girls every time they made a decent shot, because even they knew they would never make the NBA, and we were all they were gonna get out of a good game. The only white men we knew were teachers and cops, and no one had to tell us to try and stay away from them, when that was all we did in the first place, but my mother was always worried about something she didn't need to be.

When we got to Jasmine's apartment, we went straight to her room, which felt almost like it was my room too. We lived two blocks from each other and slept at each other's house as much as we slept on our own. My schoolbooks were still piled on the corner of her floor, my second bathing suit was hanging over her desk chair, where I'd left it to dry last weekend. Me and Jasmine always shared everything, and after I showered I went through Jasmine's closet like I would have gone through mine looking for something to wear out later. Only this year was sharing things getting to be a problem because we were starting to be built different. I put on a pair of Jasmine's jeans, which were tight around my hips and she told me so. "Look at you, stretching out my jeans with your big old ass," was what she actually said.

"You wish you had my ass," I said, which was true, she did, because hers was flat like a board and people teased her about it. Jasmine was small but all the meat she had on her was settled in her tummy, which was a cute little puff now but would be a gut someday if she ever got fat. It made me happy sometimes to think that even though Jasmine's face was better than mine, if I ever got fat I'd get fat the way my mother had, all in the hips and chest, and some people would still be all right with that, more than if I had a big giant stomach like Jasmine might one day. We weren't bad-looking, neither one of us, but we weren't ever going to be beautiful, either, I knew that already. We were the kind of girls who would always be very pretty *if* but *if* never seemed to happen. If Jasmine's skin cleared up and she could keep her hair done and she did something about her teeth, which were a little

crooked, and if I lost five pounds and got contact lenses and did something about the way my skin was always ashy, maybe we'd be the prettiest girls in Mount Vernon, but we weren't, we were just ugly. Jasmine had beautiful dark eyes and the most perfect nose I ever saw on anybody, and I had nice lips and a pretty good shape, and that was it. We got dressed to go to the movies because there was nothing else to do, and even though Jasmine's pants were a little tight on me and the shirt I'd borrowed was pushing my chest up in my face, I looked all right, just maybe like I was trying too hard.

When we got to the lobby of the new movie theatre, I told Jasmine I liked the way it was done up: the ceiling was gold and glittery and the carpet was still fire-truck red and not dingy burgundy like red carpet usually was. Jasmine said she thought the whole thing looked fake and tacky, and speaking of fake and tacky, look who was here. It was Cindy, in some tight jeans and a shirt that said BABY GIRL and showed off the rhinestone she had stuck to her belly button. Eddie was there, too, and Michael and a bunch of their friends, and they waved us over. When Cindy saw Jasmine she ran up and hugged her and Jasmine hugged her back, like they hadn't been calling each other skank-ass bitches five minutes ago. The boys all looked confused, because boys are stupid like that.

"Look what Eddie gave me," said Cindy, all friendly. She pulled a pink teddy bear out of her purse and squeezed its belly. It sang *You are my sunshine*, in a vibrating robot voice. It scared me.

"That's nice," said Jasmine, her voice so high that she sounded almost like the teddy bear. Cindy smiled and walked off to go kiss on Eddie some more. She was swinging her hips back and forth like the pendulum our science teacher had showed us, as if anyone was really trying to look at her.

"Instigator," I whispered to Jasmine as Cindy left. Jasmine ignored me.

"I don't have a teddy bear, neither," said Eddie's friend Tre, putting an arm around Jasmine. Jasmine pushed his arm off.

"C'mon, Jasmine. I lost my teddy bear. Can I sleep with you tonight?"

All Eddie's friends had been trying to push up on Jasmine since they found out she'd done it with him, but Jasmine wasn't having it. She looked at Tre like he was some nasty-flavored gum on the bottom of her shoe. She'd told me next time she was waiting for the real thing, not some punk high school boy. Michael put an arm around each of our shoulders and kissed us both on the cheek, me first, then Jasmine.

"You know these are my girls," he said to Tre. "Leave 'em alone."

He didn't need to mention me, but I felt good that he had. His friends mostly left me alone already because they knew I wasn't good for anything but kissing you a little bit and running away. Michael nodded good-bye as he and his friends walked toward their movie. Eddie and Cindy stayed there kissing, like that's what they had paid admission for anyway. I grabbed Jasmine's hand and pulled her in the other direction.

"That's nasty," I said. "She looks nasty all up on him in public like that."

"No one ever bought me a singing teddy bear," said Jasmine as we walked to the ticket counter. "Probably no one ever will buy me a singing teddy bear."

"I'll buy you a singing teddy bear, you silly bitch," I said.

"Shut up," she said. She had been sucking on her own bottom lip so hard she'd sucked the lipstick off it, and her lips were two different colors. "Don't you ever want to matter to somebody?"

"I matter to you," I said. "And Michael."

Jasmine clicked her tongue. "Michael," she said. "Say Michael had to shoot either you or the

Italian chick who's letting him hit it right now. Who do you think he would save?"

"Why does he have to shoot somebody?" I said.

"He just does."

"Well, he'd save me, then. She's just a girl who's fucking him."

"And you're just a girl who isn't," Jasmine said. "You don't understand anything, do you? Look.. She whirled me around and pointed at Cindy Jackson, who had her arms wrapped around Eddie and her hand scrunched in her hair. "When are we going to be that kind of girl?"

"What, the stupid kind? Everyone knows he's messing with that girl who works at the earring place at the Galleria. Probably other girls too."

"That's not even the point, stupid. She's the one he kisses in public."

"Well, that's her own dumb fault, I don't see why you gotta be worried about it," I said. "I wouldn't kiss that idiot in public if you paid me. I wouldn't kiss his fingernail in public."

Jasmine kept watching them kiss for a minute, and she looked real sad, like she might cry something. "That's your problem, Erica, you don't understand adult relationships," she said.

"Where are there adults?" I asked, looking around. I put my hand to my forehead like I was a ship's captain looking for dry land, and turned around in circles, but everywhere it was the same old people doing the same old things.

"You're right," Jasmine said. "I'm tired of these little boys. Next weekend we're going to the city. We're gonna find some real niggas who know how to treat us."

That was not the idea I meant for Jasmine to have.

We had our cousins' IDs, and we'd been clubbing a few times before, in Mount Vernon, but it wasn't the same. It was usually just a bar with a DJ, and someone always knew us; we never stayed that long or got into any real trouble. Once we were inside, people would appear out of nowhere, all *Ain't you Miss Trellis's daughter?* or *Didn't you used to be friends with my little sister?* If we flirted even a little bit, someone would show up to say, *Yo, those are some little girls right there*, and our guy would vanish. Sometimes a guy would get mad and report us to the bouncer, who would tell us it was time to go home. *You had your fun girls*, he'd say, and the thing was, usually we had. The point was getting out and saying we'd been there. Clubbing in the city was something else.

In a TV sitcom, one of our mothers would have called the other and busted us, but Jasmine's mom worked nights at a diner in Yonkers, and my mom passed out around ten, two hours after she got home from working as a secretary in White Plains, and no one was making any TV show about the two of us, so that was that. Her mom thought I was at her house and my mom thought she was at my house, and meanwhile we were standing on the platform of the MTA toward Manhattan.

Jasmine wouldn't let me wear panty hose, because I'd borrowed her shoes that opened at the toe and she laced up my leg from my ankles to just below my knee, and I felt naked: Her skirt was too short on me. The only thing Jasmine let me do right was bring Michael with us, and he was standing there wearing his brother's shoes, since he only owned Tims and sneakers. He also had his brother's ID, even though his brother didn't look a damn thing like him. Michael was smaller and copper-colored and looked like he ought to wear glasses, even though he didn't.

"Money earnin' Mount Vernon's not good enough for you two anymore?" he asked, his hands stuffed in his jeans' pockets.

"Mount Vernon's not good enough for anybody," said Jasmine. "And this city needs a new dam"

motto. Do you know anybody here who earns any real money?"

~~"Mr. Thompson's doing all right,"~~ Michael said, and I thought to turn around and see if Mr. Thompson was standing on the platform watching me, because I knew if he was he'd be disappointed

It hadn't finished turning into night yet when we'd gotten on the train, but when we got off in the city my legs shivered. It was still early, so we got slices of pizza from Famous Ray's, and sat in the window, watching people go by. Our reflections in the window glass looked watery, like we were melting at the edges.

"All right," said Jasmine. "Who are we tonight?"

"Serene and Alexis, same as always," I said, "And Michael, you're Ron, I guess." I was thinking of the names on our IDs.

"No, stupid. I mean, who are we when guys ask questions?" Jasmine said.

"Seniors?" I said.

"Nah, we're in college," said Jasmine.

"What college?" I said.

"You two? Clown College," said Michael. Jasmine threw a dirty napkin at him.

"That's you, Michael," she said. "We in City College. I'm a fashion major, and I'ma get rich selling people nice clothes so girls don't go around lookin' like Cindy Jackson, lookin' trifling all the time and so you, Erica, can find some pants that actually fit your ass in them. I got a man, and he's fine and he plays ball, but I may have to kick him to the curb because lately he's jealous of me, so I'm at the club lookin' for someone who can handle me."

"What's he jealous for?" I asked.

"He's jealous of my success, dummy. Who are you?"

I thought about what I would be if I could be anything, but I didn't really know.

"I'm at City College, too, I guess," I said. "What do you major in to be a teacher?"

"Teaching," said Jasmine.

"Ain't no major in teaching," said Michael.

"You ever been to college?" said Jasmine "Your brother ain't even been to college."

"I'm not stupid," said Michael. "I'm gonna have a degree. I was over at Mr. Thompson's today talking about books and stuff, while you two were putting a bunch of makeup on your faces."

"Whatever," I said. "Teaching. I'm majoring in teaching, then."

"What about your man?" Jasmine said.

"He's great," I said. "He's in college, too, and he's gonna be a doctor, but he also writes me love poems. And paints pictures of me. He's a painter too."

"He so great, why you at the club?" said Michael.

"Umm . . . he's dead?" I said.

"Dead?" said Jasmine.

"Dead." I nodded. "I just finished grieving. I burned all his poems and now I wish I still had them."

"Check this chick," said Jasmine. "Even when she makes shit up, her life is fucked up."

. . .

Michael gave me his jacket on the way from Ray's to the club, and I wrapped it around me and felt warmer. He was talking about earlier, when he was over at Mr. Thompson's.

"Did you know," said Michael, "that the Ethiopians beat the Italian army?"

"Do I care?" Jasmine asked. "No wonder I never meet nobody, hanging out with you."

Michael made a face at Jasmine behind her back, but we were quiet for the rest of the walk.

I didn't know why Jasmine needed to meet people besides us anyway. Jasmine thought just because people were older, they were going to be more interesting. They didn't look any more interesting, and lined up outside the club like we did on school picture day. At the door one of the bouncers checked Jasmine's ID, then looked her up and down and waved her in. He barely looked at mine, just glanced at my chest and stamped my hand. But he didn't even take Michael's, just shook his head at him and laughed.

"Not tonight," he said.

Michael didn't look too surprised, but he reached for my wrist when he saw I was waiting there, like I would have left with him if he asked me.

"You be careful with yourself, all right?"

I nodded. The bouncer turned around like he might change his mind about letting me in. "Bye Ron," said Jasmine, and she took off.

I ran in after her. "You didn't have to just leave him like that."

She rolled her eyes. "Whole room full of people and you're worried about Michael. He can take care of himself."

I knew Michael would be all right. It was me I was worried about. The dance floor was full, and the strobe light brought people in and out of focus like holograms. Up on the metal platforms girls were dancing in shorts and bikini tops. The one closest to me had her body bent in half, her hands on her ankles and her shiny-gold-short-covered butt in the air. I wondered how you got to be a girl like that. Did you care too much what other people thought, or did you stop caring?

Me and Jasmine did what we always did at a club, moved to the center of the dance floor and moved our hips to the music. By the end of the first song two men had come up behind us and started grinding. I looked up at Jasmine to make sure it wasn't Godzilla behind me, and when she nodded and gave me a thumbs-up, I pressed into the guy harder, winding forward and backward. At school they got mad about dancing like that, but we never learned any other kind of dancing except the steps from music videos, and good luck finding a boy who could keep up with that.

After we'd been dancing for an hour and I was sweaty and my thighs were tired, we went to the bathroom to fix ourselves. Nothing could be done about your hair once it started to sweat out, and I was glad at least I had pinned most of it up so you couldn't see the frizzy parts too well. I let Jasmine fix my makeup. I could feel her fingers on my face, fixing my eye shadow, smoothing on my lip gloss. I remembered a book we'd read in middle school and said, "It's like I'm Helen Keller, and you're my Teacher."

"You're the teacher," Jasmine said. "I'm Alexis, the fashion designer."

"We're not," I said, because it seemed important all of a sudden, but Jasmine was already on her way out the door.

When we left the bathroom we stood by the bar awhile and waited for people to buy us drinks. I used to always drink Midori sours because they tasted just like Kool-Aid, but Jasmine told me I couldn't keep drinking those because that was the easiest way to show you were underage. I tried different drinks on different guys. A lawyer from Brooklyn bought me something too strong when I told him to surprise me, and kept talking about the river view from his apartment while I tried to drink

it in little tiny sips. A construction worker from Queens told me he'd been waiting all his life for me, which must've been a pretty long time because he was kind of old. A real college student, from Harlem, walked away from me when he kept asking me questions about City College and I couldn't answer them right. *Go home, sweetie*, he said, but I couldn't, so I tried other names and stories. I was Renee and Yolanda and Shameka. I was a record store clerk and a waitress and a newspaper photographer. It was easy to be somebody else when no one cared who you were in the first place.

I realized after a while that I didn't see Jasmine anymore. I listened for her, but all I could hear was other people talking, and the boom of music from the speakers above me. Then I heard her laugh on the other side of the bar and start to sing along with Foxy Brown, *Ain't no niggga like the one I got*. She was sitting on a silver bar chair, and there were guys all around her. One of them was telling her how pretty she sang, which was a lie: she had no voice to begin with, plus she was making it sound as stupid and breathy on purpose. When she saw me looking at her, she waved.

"Yo," she said, smiling big like she had the only other time I'd seen her drunk. "Serene." I'd forgotten which name I was answering to and looked at her funny for a minute. I walked closer and one of the men put his arm around me.

"She can come too," he said, and Jasmine smiled, and when she got up for real, I wondered where everyone was going.

I followed Jasmine until I realized we were leaving the club. It was like my whole body blinked. The club had been hot and sticky and outside it was almost cold. The floodlights on the block were so bright that for a minute I thought the sun must have never gone down all the way; it was that light outside.

"The hell?" I said.

"We're going to an after party," she giggled. "In the Bronx. The valet is getting their car. I was just about to look for you."

"No." I shook my head.

"Yes," she said, putting her arms around me and kissing me on the forehead. One of the guys whistled.

The valet pulled the car up, and I counted the men for the first time. There were four of them around two of us and one Mazda 626.

"There's no room," I said. "Let's go." I started to pull Jasmine's hand, but the man by the front window patted his lap, and Jasmine crawled into the car and sat there and put her arms around him.

"Room now," Jasmine said, and because I was out of excuses I got in the car, and five minutes later we were speeding up the West Side Highway. I remembered a story that had been on the news a few weeks ago. Some girl upstate had ended up in the hospital after she went home with five men she met on the bus. They didn't say on the news exactly what they'd done to her, only that she was lucky to be alive. "What was that child thinking, going anyplace with all those strangers?" my mother had said. I wanted to call my mother right then and say she wasn't, Mama, she wasn't thinking at all, one minute she was one place and the next she was another and it all happened before she could stop it.

Then I thought maybe I was overreacting. Lots of people went to other people's houses and most of them didn't end up dead. Jasmine's new friends didn't really look dangerous. They looked like they spent more time getting dressed than me and Jasmine had. The one Jasmine was sitting on had a sparkly diamond earring. The one next to me had on a beige linen shirt. They all smelled like cologne beneath sweat. I liked that smell. My sheets had smelled like that once after Michael took a nap in my bed, and I didn't want to wash them until it went away. I felt better. If I was going to kill somebody, I thought, I would not get all dressed up first. I would not put on a lot of perfume. When I turned away

from the window to look at the people in the car again, I saw that Jasmine was kissing the man with the earring. She was kissing him deep, and I could see half her tongue going in and out of his mouth. His hands were tracing the top of her shirt. He fingered the chain she always wore around her neck and stopped kissing her to look at it.

“Princess,” he mumbled. “Are you a princess?”

Jasmine giggled. Her chain glittered like a dime at the bottom of a swimming pool.

“Are you a princess too?” the man next to me asked. He looked down at me, and I could see that his eyes were a pretty green, but bloodshot.

“No,” I said. I folded my arms across my chest.

“Man, look who we got here,” said the one in the passenger seat, turning around. “College girl with a attitude problem. How’d we end up with these girls again? Y’all are probably virgins, aren’t you?”

“No,” Jasmine said. “Like hell we are. We look like virgins to you?”

“Nah,” he said, and I didn’t know whether to feel pissed off or pretty.

The car stopped in front of an apartment building, and I followed them into the lobby and into the elevator, and earring guy still had his arms around Jasmine and pretty-eyes guy was still looking at me. If I’d wanted to lose my virginity to a random guy in the Bronx, I would’ve done it already, not just let Jasmine give it away. I knew if she saw my face, she would know how mad I was, but she had her head in earring guy’s neck. The clicks and dings in the elevator seemed like they were saying something in a language I didn’t speak. I thought about pulling her off of him. I thought about hitting her. They’d pushed the button for the eighth floor, but the doors opened on five. There was nobody standing there and I kept waiting for the thing that would stop us, and then I thought, Nothing will stop this but me. So I ran, out of the elevator and down the stairs and out the front door and down to the bodega on the corner.

There was a whole pile of fruit lit up outside, like what anybody really needed in the middle of the night was a mango. Inside, it was comforting just looking at the rows and rows of bread and cereal and soup all crammed together, and I stared at them for a while. There was an old man behind the counter and I thought it was too late for him to be working, and he was looking at me like he thought it was too late for me to be alone in his store. He looked like how I would have imagined my grandfather looking if I’d known him.

“You all right?” he said. “You need some medicine? Some ginger ale?”

I shook my head, because I was looking for Jasmine to be behind me, but she wasn’t.

“You need to call somebody?”

I pointed at the pay phone outside on the corner, and the man behind the counter shrugged. When I realized Jasmine wasn’t running after me, I walked back outside. The door jingled at me when I opened it, and I was mad at it for sounding so happy. I didn’t know who else to call at two-thirty in the morning, so I beeped Michael and pushed in the pay phone number. I was afraid at first he wouldn’t call back, but he did, ten minutes later.

“Just come get me,” I said, instead of explaining, and all he asked for was the street names.

I’d been leaning against the pay phone for twenty minutes when his brother’s car pulled up. Michael was in the passenger’s seat. He got out when he saw me, and gave me a hug.

“You all right?” he asked. “Did something happen?” I nodded, then shook my head. I was starting to feel stupid, because I knew I looked a mess, and nothing really had happened to me.

“Where’s your girl?”

“Up in one of those buildings, with some guys she met at the club.”

Michael’s face wrinkled like it was made of clay and I had squished it. “Do we need to go get her?”

I thought of Jasmine in that man’s lap, Jasmine laughing and saying *Like hell we are*, Jasmine

letting me run out of the elevator by myself.

“No. Leave that trick where she is,” I said. Once I said the words I was sorry, but it seemed like the kind of thing you couldn’t take back. I wanted Michael to be mad at me, to say he was Jasmine’s friend, too, and he wouldn’t leave her like that, but he just shrugged at his brother and opened the car door.

“Uh-uh,” said Ron, when Michael started to get in the front seat. “Let the lady up front.”

I sat beside him while Michael scowled and got in the back.

“I guess we can’t take you home to your mom’s or you’ll be in trouble, huh?” Ron asked.

I wanted to say yes, they could take me home, that I deserved to be in trouble, that I’d let my mother slap me if it meant we’d go get Jasmine and both of us could be at home sleeping in our room tonight, but I didn’t.

“No,” I said. “Can I stay at your place? I’m s’posed to be at Jasmine’s.”

“No doubt,” he said, and squeezed my knee, stopping to look at me so hard that I wasn’t even sure what I’d said, but I wanted to take that back too. I remembered my mother saying no one does you a favor who doesn’t want something back sometime. Ron was driving already and I looked out the window again and listened to the radio. Even this time of night they were still playing Tupac, which they never would have been doing when he was still alive.

Inside at Michael and Ron’s house, they put me on the downstairs couch and gave me a blanket. When Ron said good night and went into his bedroom in the basement, I thought maybe I’d once imagined the look he gave me earlier. I unlaced my shoes and took down my hair and curled up in the blanket, trying not to think about Jasmine and what kind of a mess I’d left her in. I thought of her laughing, thought of the look on her face when she had closed her eyes and let that man kiss her, and for a second I hated her and then a second later I couldn’t remember anything I’d ever hated more than leaving her. I was sitting there in the dark when Ron came back and put an arm around me.

“You know, you’re too pretty for me to leave you on the couch like that,” he said, pulling me toward him. I didn’t know that, but I did understand then that there was no such thing as safe, only safer; that this, if it didn’t happen now, would happen later but not better. I was safer than Jasmine right now, safer than I might have been. He kissed me, hard, like he was trying to get to the last drop of something, and I kissed him back, harder, like I wanted to get it all back. The noise in my head stopped and I didn’t have to think about anything but where to put all the pieces of my body next.

He grabbed my hand and led me to the bedroom, and he kissed me again and pushed my skin around my hips. “You’re beautiful,” he said, which must’ve been a lie by this time of night. I sat on the bed and pulled my underwear off and realized they were Jasmine’s. I thought how mad she’d be that it was me and not her doing this. I kissed him and he kept going and I didn’t stop him.

Afterward I was embarrassed because he was embarrassed, and I knew I couldn’t stay there, but instead of going back to the couch I walked upstairs to Michael’s room and climbed into his bed. I smelled the way I remembered him. I just wanted to touch him, really, and not to wake up alone. But he thought I meant something by it, and I let him. I let him kiss me until he felt under my shirt and he

fingers found my bra hook, which was still undone because I hadn't bothered to fasten it.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Right," he said. He turned away from me and faced the wall. I looked at the back of his ears and thought about a few hours earlier, about him holding my wrist, telling me to be careful with myself. I reached to pull him toward me. I remembered the feeling of his thumb and index finger right there on my pulse as I had nodded yes.

Snakes

The summer I turned nine I went to Tallahassee to visit my grandmother for the first and last time. It was a hot, muggy summer, the kind of weather where you think it's going to storm any minute, but it rarely does. That much hasn't changed in sixteen years—not the weather, not my sense of Tallahassee then and now, as a place where your skin crawls with the sensation that something urgent is about to happen, but you never know what, or when. That first summer I flew to visit, I was skittish as soon as I exited the plane from New Jersey, escorted by a tight-skirted stewardess who handed me a gold plastic set of pin-on wings before we walked to the arrivals gate.

My grandmother had me picked up from the airport by a driver in a company car. The driver worked for a plastics company that still had my grandfather's name, though he'd been dead since before I was born. The driver reminded me a little bit of my father—he had the same reddish-brown skin, the same big smile—and while we waited for my luggage to come around the baggage carousel he gave me a stick of cinnamon bubble gum that I folded and tucked into the pocket of my shorts along with the wings, which I could feel pressing into my leg. My parents, as consolation for shipping me off to my grandmother while they spent the summer in Brazil researching indigenous environmental activism, had loaded my suitcase with books. It was something they did every time they went somewhere without me. Along with the small paperback dictionary my parents had given me last summer, I kept a couple of the new books with me to thumb through on the plane: *Introduction to Rites and Rituals*; *Talismans: A Photographic Record*, *Natural Wonders of the Amazon Rain Forest*.

The book on talismans I found particularly intriguing. I looked at pictures of stones and amulets, brightly dyed pieces of fabric, small and elaborately carved sculptures, and wished that I had brought something magical with me. I wondered if gum or plastic was strong enough to be a talisman; I thought of fashioning the wings into a protective necklace. My own interactions with my grandmother had been limited: my mother avoided family events whenever possible, and at the handful I did accompany her to, my grandmother had barely spoken to me. She was the only thing in the world I had ever seen my mother scared of, my mother who told offhand stories about living through monsoons in Asia and military coups in Africa and near encounters with poisonous foot-long centipedes in South America the way other people's mothers talked about what they'd had for dinner the night before. Every time she got off the phone with my grandmother, my mother drank a glass of wine, followed by three cups of Zen tea. My father, who almost never yelled, raised his voice at her from behind the closed bedroom door when she made plans that involved seeing her mother, telling her she ought to know better by now and refusing to go with her. They'd fought over sending me to my grandmother in the first place, an argument I'd strained my ears to hear and silently hoped my father would win.

Usually when my parents traveled, I stayed with my aunt Claire, my father's sister, but she'd been in poor health, and my mother worried that having me for the summer would be too much for her to keep up with. My father pointed out that I didn't need much keeping up with: I read books, I ate when I was compelled, I sometimes wrote embellished accounts of my day in a leather-bound black diary. I was the sort of child who generally had to be coerced into playing with other children—the kind who my parents took her to anthropology department cocktail parties so often that their colleagues referred to me as their youngest graduate student—but my mother had said it was too much to impose on Au-

Claire, and anyway, it wasn't me my grandmother hated, it was her, to which my father had responded *Give her time*. I rolled the words over and over in my head, willing him to be wrong, but if I thought my grandmother would like me better when my mother wasn't around, our reunion quickly disabused me of the thought.

. . .

“Unbelievable,” was the first thing my grandmother said when she saw me. From the airport to her house, it had been twenty minutes of loopy, winding roads, packed so densely with trees that looking out the windows from the backseat of the car, I could often see nothing but the green canopies that shaded us. My grandmother's house was at the end of a circular driveway, a white wooden one-story southern masterpiece, with columns on the front porch and a veranda above it. Coral vines crept gently up its sides, and although it was only four bedrooms inside, at the time I thought of it as a mansion: it could have contained at least three town houses the size of the one I lived in back in Camden. The driver removed my bags from the trunk and walked me up the stairs to the front door. Instinctively, he held his hand as he rang the bell, and squeezed it tighter as the door opened to reveal my grandmother behind it, squinting at me as if her eyes were playing tricks on her.

But for the expression on her face, the way her eyes went from startled to angry as she said *Unbelievable*, she looked remarkably like my mother. They had the same delicate upturned nose and wide brown eyes, and the same fine blond hair, though my mother generally wore hers loose, and my grandmother's was held back in an immaculate twist, and threaded with fine streaks of gray. She stepped out of the doorway and gestured toward the driver with one hand, motioning for him to take my suitcase up the spiral staircase. She ushered me into the house, shutting the door behind me. She gave me a perfunctory kiss on the top of the forehead and reached a hand out to tentatively touch one of my cornrows. She shook her head. “Did your mother do this to you?”

“My hair?” I asked. I looked down at the polished hardwood of the floor beneath me. My mother could barely do my hair herself, and knew I'd never manage to keep it untangled on my own. It was one of those things white mothers of black children learn the hard way once and then tend to forget to remember. Just before I'd left, she had gotten one of her undergraduates to braid my hair in tight pink lotioned cornrows, so recent they still itched and pulled at my scalp.

“Mommy can't do my hair,” I said. “A girl from her school did it for her.”

“I swear, even on a different continent, that woman—When you go upstairs, take them out. You're not a perfectly decent-looking child, and for whatever reason your mother sends you here looking like a little hoodlum.”

“I'm wearing pink,” I said, more in my own defense than in my mother's. I had dressed myself, and Aunt Claire had driven me to the airport: my parents had left for Rio the day before. My grandmother considered my argument, evaluated my hot-pink shorts as if prepared to object to them as well, but before she could, my cousin Allison came bounding down the stairs to hug me, blond pigtailed flying behind her. When she threw her arms around me and kissed me on the cheek, she smelled strongly of sour-apple Jolly Ranchers and women's perfume that she later confessed she'd stolen from her mother.

“I think you look nice,” whispered Allison. She took me upstairs to the room we were sharing for the summer, and then spent the next half-hour helping me undo each braid, my hair spiraling out in

tight, disheveled curls. Allison had been my parent's ace in the hole, the only thing that kept me from trying to secretly squeeze myself into one of their suitcases so they'd have to take me to Brazil with them. Her parents were spending the summer on a Caribbean cruise, and my uncle had suggested my mother that since she'd be at my grandmother's all summer anyway, it might be nice for us to spend some time together. Allison was my playmate at awkward family gatherings, the person I made faces at across the table at Christmas dinner the one year we'd all gathered at her parents' house in Orlando. (It was the last holiday my mother had agreed to spend with her own mother. I'd heard her on the phone last Christmas a year later, saying almost angrily, *No, we're not coming. Last year she said she was dying, and then she didn't.*)

Allison made those first few weeks at my grandmother's house bearable, almost pleasant. I'd never had a backyard before, but at my grandmother's we had an acre of greenery. There was a lawn of impossibly bright grass, landscaped with flowering hydrangea bushes and neatly clipped ornamental shrubbery. Half a mile down the block, the manicured lawns of my grandmother's neighborhood gave way to almost tropical lushness: hanging crape myrtles with vivid pink flowers and twisted, many-stemmed trunks, tall oaks brushed with Spanish moss. When we followed the gravel path off the main road, we found ourselves at a lake about a mile wide; it took us the better part of a day to circle its swampy edges. We shaded ourselves from the thick summer heat by resting underneath one tree after another. The first time we went to the lake, our grandmother admonished us never to do it again and screamed at us that we had worried her by running off and the lake was a dangerous place for little girls to be alone. It went in one ear and out the other: we were already in love with what we'd found there.

It wasn't that my grandmother didn't try. She woke us up one morning with the enthusiastic promise that we'd be going swimming. She had laid out clothes for us, and though usually when we went to the pool at home I climbed into the car wearing nothing but my swim-suit and jellies, I wanted my grandmother to be happy with me, and wore the yellow sundress she'd picked out. Allison's dress was blue, which matched her eyes, and the bow my grandmother put in her hair after she brushed it. My grandmother tried to brush my hair, too, but between the muggy, humid summer air and the ineptitude of my attempts to control it, it had turned itself into a tangled baby afro, one that Allison's firm-bristled brush did nothing for. That morning my grandmother set out to comb it into pigtails, but after I began to cry from the pain of her yanking on my scalp and demanded hair grease—which of course she didn't have—the comb finally snapped and my grandmother gave up.

"Maybe the water will help," she said, defeated.

I didn't understand why we needed to be so presentable to go swimming in the first place—not until she turned into the driveway of a clubhouse that looked like something out of a fairy tale. Though we were there to swim, it took us two hours to get anywhere near the pool. My grandmother walked around the looping paths of the private lake, encouraging us to feed the ducks and asserting how pretty the lake was, as if trying to convince us of something. She took us for brunch in the clubhouse; the tables were a dark oak and the ceiling above us was decorated with crisscrossing gold latticework. I made myself dizzy mapping out an imaginary chart of constellations.

Halfway through our pancakes a woman in the tallest heels I'd ever seen a person actually walk in came into the room. "Lydia!" she said when she saw my grandmother. Until then I hadn't thought of my grandmother as having a first name. The woman's skirt swished from side to side when she

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