

Behind you

JACQUELINE WOODSON

speak

An Imprint of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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OTHER BOOKS BY JACQUELINE WOODSON

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SPEAK

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For my family

And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth.

—Raymond Carver

The Ending

Jeremiah

YOU DO NOT DIE. YOUR SOUL STEPS OUT OF YOUR BODY, shakes itself hard because it's been carrying the weight of your heavy skin for fifteen years. Then your soul lifts up and looks down on your body lying there—looks down on the blood running onto concrete, your eyes snapped open like the pages in some kid's forgotten picture book, your chest not moving. Your soul sees this and feels something beyond sadness—feels its whole self whispering further away. *Shhhh. Shhhh. Shhhh*—past the trees in Central Park, past the statues and runners and children playing on swings. *Shhhh. Shhhh. Shhhh*. Over yellow taxicabs and late-afternoon flickering streetlights. *Shhhh* away from the dusting of snow, the white tips of trees, the darkening sky. Already you hear your mother screaming. Already you see your father dropping his head into his hands. Helpless. Already you see your friends—walking through the halls of Percy Academy. Stunned. But you do not die. Each breath your soul takes is cool and reminds you of a taste you loved a long time ago. Licorice. Peppermint. Rain. Then your soul comes back to you all over again, only lighter and freer and able to be a thousand and one places at once. Your new soul eyes look around. See two cops standing there with their mouths hanging open. One cop curses and kicks a tree. Slowly your soul realizes it's in a park. There are trees all around you. And both cops look scared.

He's dead, one cop says.

And the other curses again. Your soul doesn't like the way the curse word sounds. Too hard. Too heavy in the new soul-light air.

The cops can't see you. They see a dead body on the ground—a young boy. A black boy. They know this is not the *man* they'd been looking for. They know they've made a mistake. Your soul looks at the boy and knows his friends called him Miah but his full name was Jeremiah Roselind. Tall. Dark. He has locks and the locks are spread over the ground. His eyes are opened wide. Greenish gray lifeless eyes. Your soul thinks—somebody loved that boy once. Thinks—once that boy was me. The wind blows the snow left, right and up. You are so light, you move with the wind and the snow. Let the weather take you. And it lifts you up—over a world of sadness and anger and fear. Over a world of first kisses and hands touching and someone you're falling in love with. She's there now. Right there. Look closely. Yeah. That's her. That's my Ellie.

The Hurting

Ellie

FOR A LONG TIME AFTER MIAH DIED, SO MANY PEOPLE DIDN'T sleep. At night, we lay in bed with our eyes wide open and watched the way night settled down over wherever we were. I was in a room on the Upper West Side, in a house my parents moved to a long time ago. Not a *house*—a duplex *apartment* in a fancy building with a doorman. My dad's a doctor. My mother stays at home. I go to Percy Academy. Some people look at me and see a white girl in a uniform—burgundy jacket and gray skirt—and think, *She has all the privilege in the world*. I look back at them, thinking, *If only you knew*.

If only they knew how we were sprinkled all over the city—me in my big room, Nelia in her Fort Greene brownstone, Norman in his girlfriend's apartment, aunts and uncles and cousins, even strangers—all over New York City—none of us slept. We lay there staring up at our ceilings or out into the darkness. Or some days we stopped in the middle of doing something and forgot what it was we were doing. We thought, *Jeremiah's dead*. We whispered, *Jeremiah's dead*. As if the whispering and the thinking could help us to understand. We didn't eat enough. We peed only when the need to pee got so big, we thought we'd wet our pants. We pulled the covers off ourselves in the morning, then sat on the edge of our beds, not knowing what to do next. If those strangers looked, really looked into my privileged white girl face, they would have seen the place where I wasn't even there. Where a part of me died too.

Miah died on a Saturday afternoon. That evening, the calls started coming. First his mom, Nelia, asking if Miah was still with me. Then his dad, Norman. Then the cops. Then silence. Silence that lasted into the night and into the next dawn. Then the phone ringing one more time and Nelia saying, *Ellie, Miah's been shot. . . .*

I don't remember much more than that. There was a funeral. There were tears. There were days and days spent in my bed. A fever maybe.

There was no more Miah.

No more Miah.

No more Miah and me.

Nelia

I USED TO BE A WRITER. IDEAS AND PEOPLE AND PLACES WOULD come to me and I'd write it all down. There was such a *clarity* to the world then. When I sat down at my desk and began to write, I felt like I understood *everything*. I felt brilliant and whole and good. But who understands *everything*. Who understands *anything*. I mean *really*. People getting awards for being geniuses and

brilliant writers and world shakers. Do they understand. Do they have any *idea* what it feels like wake up some days not even sure of your own name. What is my name? . . . Nelia. It's Nelia. My whole name? Cornelia Elizabeth Roselind. But before it was Roselind, it was something else. This morning, I don't remember. It doesn't matter anyway. Who I was. Who I am. Who I'll be one day. You see, the whole world has changed for me. It's filled with people saying things I don't understand. Faces on the television screen talk at me—lips moving with no sound. There's a war somewhere. And somewhere else, there are suicide bombers. People missing and found. Children looking for homes. Candy for sale. This morning, I saw a dog with only three legs. It was black and had the saddest eyes. But what dog isn't sad eyed. And what child doesn't want a home. My skin used to be so soft. But now I feel like a hard shell is growing over my blood and bones. *The New York Times* grows like a sunflower just inside the vestibule. It gets delivered in a blue plastic bag. A blue sunflower, growing out of control. But I can't stop it from growing. Someone needs to come to this house. Teach me how to dial a phone again. Because then I could call someone—who?—and say—what? Please don't deliver any more papers. Is that what you say? When a person answers the phone—do you ask for *less* of something? Who wants *less* of something? Don't we all want more?

I am not old. My hair is still black. The way it curls has not changed. Except in one spot. There. Right where the tiny indent of my neck bends into my head. The hair is straight there. Once it used to curl and the curls moved toward my neck. But now the hair sticks straight down like someone's bad perm job.

And my hands. I am not old, but my hands shake sometimes. I cannot find a pen that writes. I cannot find paper to write on. I cannot. I cannot. I cannot.

So I sleep. In this big house with all of its quiet, what else is there to do?

Kennedy

LOST OUR LAST GAME UP AGAINST DALTON LAST WINTER, 102-62. Dalton don't have no game. I mean, that team is *busted*. People trying to say it's 'cause Miah got kilt—killed—I mean, I got *killed*. But even if Miah's dead, that ain't no reason to get your booty *slammed* by some I-don't-want-no-scrubs from *Dalton*. I mean, show a dead brother some respect and at least go into some overtime or somethin'. Don't be just straight-up losing like that.

I'ma tell you—there's things I love about Percy Academy and stuff that be making me crazy. Like the team. I mean, I love ball, but Percy got the A-1 sorriest team this side of, I don't know—this side of the *galaxy*. Probably got a better team dribbling down the Milky Way. Three-inch Martians probably got better jump shots than the guys on my team. But there's stuff I love about that school too. Like—okay, so I know this is whacked and if someone said I said it, I'd be ready to mess them up real bad and nobody'd believe them anyway 'cause everybody at Percy knows Kennedy don't be playing that, but . . . I love the uniforms. Carlos be saying, *There goes Kennedy in his monkey suit*, but I know it's just jealousy eating him up from the inside out. See, where I live, don't a whole lotta kids be going to private school. Kids be going to school—it ain't like how reporters be trying to televise all that talk about high dropout rate and teenage pregnancy and blasé, blasé . . . Yeah, that goes on where I live, but it be going on where everybody else be living too. Only trouble is—the news gotta need to be slanting stuff just to make people afraid. Like if peeps ain't running around scared enough

as it is. I just hate that the news gotta be making people afraid of somebody that look like me. (Miah. If Miah's really dead, then that's the reason—he's dead because of people being afraid. That's why I don't try to be afraid of nothing. In the morning I get up, brush my teeth, take a shower. I look in the mirror and take off my nylon, check my braids, make sure they working underneath it. Maybe my scalp's dry, I'll run a little bit of grease in the parts, spray a little oil sheen on my braids—you know, make them nice. Then I put on my Percy clothes: gray pants—I wear them baggy, the school don't trip, so that's cool—white shirt with a maroon tie. Maroon jacket got a Percy Academy patch on the left breast. Walk out of building 1633 Albany Houses in NeverRan Never-Will Brownsville Brooklyn, New York. Yeah—it's the projects. Yeah, I come from the projects. So what? Lots of Percy kids got heavy pockets, live in those big buildings on the Upper East Side and the Upper West Side. They be having doormen and dry cleaning dropped off and whatnot. Stuff like that. I guess some of them probably think they better than me because they got some cash and whatever, whatever. But truth is, cash and doormen and some nice clothes ain't gonna be going with you to the next place. Shoot—given the fact that we gotta wear uniforms at Percy, nice clothes don't even be getting you through *this* place. Yeah, I believe in a next place. And I believe in this place too. And when I'm sitting in my room, staring up at the posters of all the ballplayers that came before me—I start understanding that I know some things. I might not be real rich or real smart or real good looking, but I know some things. I know a cop shot Miah in the back and the bullet went straight through from his shoulder blade to his heart. And then the heart just turned itself off like a TV. And maybe it burned Miah to die that way. Maybe it hurt real bad going down like that. But some days, I feel my boy right here, right next to me. He's sitting on my bed. And he's looking up at the posters too. And he's got this big grin on his face. I even feel his hand—slapping mine, saying, *You know we shoulda whipped Dalton, yo.* And I take his hand, pull him to me real quick, slap his back. Say, *Who you tellin', Miah man? Who you tellin'?*

Norman Roselind

THE SNOW STARTED MELTING IN JANUARY. AFTER THAT CAME the rain. Jeremiah'd been dead about a month and a half by then. Each day, I looked out the window expecting to see some sun but it didn't come for a long time. Shoot. It was like Miah died and the sun just changed its mind about shining. City so gray, it could've been Seattle. Pain in me so deep, some days I just stood wherever I was, my mouth hanging open, my eyes burning up. My heart always just banging and banging. All these years I hadn't thought about it, and then my son died and my heart started pounding, always, like it wanted to break right through my chest. Even as I'm telling this, it's banging. Doctors say nothing they can do about this feeling. And I know they're looking at me wanting to say—*We can't bring him back, Mr. Roselind.*

So the world just stayed gray, my eyes burn, and then some days the tears come and don't stop, and then some days it's just my heart, banging and banging like that.

But I'm talking about that winter, right after everything. I was trying to do the things a person do to keep moving—dry cleaners, auto repair, post office . . . I'd taken a roll of film to get developed and when I got it back, there were some pictures in there from that day me and Miah had gone for a drive out to East Hampton because I was looking at this location to shoot my next movie. I don't want anybody to ever have to imagine what it's like to walk out of a drugstore with an envelope full of

pictures under their arm—then, when they open that envelope, all they see is picture after picture of their dead son. I wouldn't wish that on anybody—no matter how deep my dislike of that person was. But that was me, walking up Fulton Street, my throat closing up so tight, I had to stop walking to remember how to breathe again. I remember a little girl and her mother crossed the street when they saw me standing there like that. Another woman asked if I was all right. I said, *My son . . . my son was killed. Jeremiah. My son was Jeremiah. He was only fifteen. Only fifteen.* I kept saying that. *Only fifteen.* And the tears came and wouldn't stop. The woman wanted to know what my address was and somehow I was able to tell her. She put her hand under my elbow and slowly led me home. Lois Ann was there. She thanked the woman. Took me upstairs and got me into bed. That was a long time ago. Some days it feels like it just happened.

In one of the pictures, Miah's got this big grin on his face. When I started going through those pictures, it took me right back to that day. Made me remember that we'd been having this whole talk about white people and I'd said something about white people not knowing they were white. Like when they go to a party, they don't know they're white if it's all white people in the room, but if they go to a party of black folks—*then* they know. I remember Miah getting quiet and staring out the window. He was wearing a green jacket and his black jeans. I remember looking over at him and thinking, *How do me and Nelia make such a beautiful child?* But he wasn't a child anymore. There was just the thinnest road of hair going across his top lip and his face had changed—he had my jawline—sharp. And he had the same habit I have of clenching his teeth when he was thinking real hard on something. We drove for a bit, him staring and clenching, me wondering what was on his mind.

“You don't think there's one white person in this world, Daddy,” Miah said, “somewhere, who's different? Who gets up in the morning and says, ‘I'm white, so what am I gonna do with this—how am I going to use it to change the world?’ ”

Now I know why he was asking. Know why we were having that talk that day. But what good is that I know now?

Jeremiah

THE SOUL LOOKS BACK AND WONDERS. MINE DID. ONLY I didn't know it was my soul—thought it was me looking back at me. But I kept hearing my grandmother's voice. The way she'd say that—*The soul looks back and wonders*—every time something made no sense to her. Or every time I did something that seemed completely outrageous. Like the time I put a plastic snake on top of her laundry pile. She got so scared, she couldn't even catch her breath. And her sitting there with her hand on her chest breathing hard in and out made me realize—even at seven years old—that I'd done something there wasn't any turning back from. That the way she was gonna beat my butt once she finally *did* catch her breath was gonna be like no butt whipping I'd ever felt before. Or would ever feel again, thank goodness. And later on, as she took the strap to my bare legs and sore behind, she kept saying, “The soul”—*slap*—“looks”—*slap*—“back”—*slap*—“and”—*slap*—“wonders”—*slap*.

My grandmother could beat a behind, yo. That's no joke. She'd get this look on her face when you got fresh, or got caught playing with matches, or put a snake on her laundry. And the look was like “Where in God's name did you ever get an idea that that was the right thing to . . . ” And then you knew. You knew it was all over for your behind. My mom and pops never laid a hand on me, but m

grandma made up for their non-whipping parenting by letting me know every now and then that
“In order to be raised right, Jeremiah—you cannot spare the rod.”

I was her only grandchild and she loved me with this love so fierce, my pops used to say you could feel it coming on for miles. Soon as we got a call saying she was on her way up to New York, my pop would say,

“Stand still, Miah. You feel the love coming?”

Desire Viola Roselind

FOR EIGHT YEARS I WAS MIAH’S GRAM. BEFORE THAT TOO, I reckon. Feels like I’ve known him since before he got to the world—longer than he knew himself, truthfully. Seems like we’d been friends really—not gram and first-born grandson—somewhere before life on earth . . .

Life. On. Earth.

Think on that. Earth looks small from far’ways. I remember when I was a child and my daddy showed me a blue marble, those kind that don’t just have blue in them but lots of other colors besides. He says to me, *Girl, look hard at this here marble, ’cause what you looking at is the whole wide world.*

And I looked hard at the marble and then I looked real hard at my pa and I reckon I must have been thinking that here’s a man I always loved who’s lost his mind.

We lived in Aiken then. A little brick house. You went up three stone stairs and then you were on our porch. And there was a swing on the porch—old iron swing that squealed to high heaven every time you sat down on it and commenced to swinging. Well, you went up those three stone stairs and passed that porch swing and then you were at our front screen door. Then you were in our front room—hardwood floors, a big potbellied stove—stove warmed the house like you wouldn’t believe. One year, my baby sister set fire to her own dress sleeve standing too close to the open stove door. The skin on her arm was never the same after that, and she carried that arm sort of different from the other. When she got to be a young woman, she never wore short sleeves—not even in the hottest months—because she was ashamed. Don’t know if the shame come from the scars or from her childhood foolishness of sticking her arm in the fire. Reckon it had to be some of both. Guess that’s my first recollection of how people hide their scars.

Girl, my daddy said, I know you think I lost my mind, but this marble is how the world looks everybody but us humans.

I looked at the marble. I looked at my daddy. I looked around at our little brick house. Back and forth and back and forth like that till I must have looked some kind of foolish myself.

Sir, I said, I reckon I don’t know what you mean when you say everybody but us humans. Ain’t nobody else but God to see.

Uh-uh, Sweet Pea, my daddy said. He’d been squatting down, sitting back on his haunches like a lot of people used to do. He’d sit that way, squatted down, ’cause he was tall—over six feet—and me and my sisters and brothers had gotten our mama’s gift for not growing tall. I was the smallest in the family—tiny hands, tiny feet and body.

Well, my daddy stood up and looked down on me and let himself smile. He had a nice, big, white-toothed smile, my daddy did.

Close your eyes, my daddy said.

I did.

~~And just let yourself think, Sweet Pea. Think about this world without its color and sound and smells. Let your breathing stop a moment.~~

I did.

~~Now commence to breathing again and open up those eyes.~~

I did.

~~And here is the whole wide world again. But better now, isn't it?~~

I looked around, and I liked the way it felt to have everything back in its place, the way the room came back in view and the floor felt hard again. And my daddy standing there grinning like he would be that way . . . always. . . .

And now, here I am—way on the other side of that story and that beautiful day. I grew up and grew old and then I got sickly and I died. But before all that happened, I had me a son, and that son had himself a son. And he named that boy-child Jeremiah.

And some mornings, Jeremiah comes to where I'm sitting, rocking in this big maple chair, the cushion softer than any cushion should ever be, the wood smelling like it was cut only an hour ago, the air cool and gentle as a child's hand. And Miah sits down beside me and we look out before us where the rest of the world is hustling past—people doing what they need to be doing to get through the days.

And Jeremiah says, *Tell me that story again, Grandma, the one about the marble.*

And the love in my heart for that boy-child just fills up inside me and spills all over.

Ellie

THE FIRST TIME I TRIED TO WALK TO THE PLACE WHERE THE cops shot Miah, it was dark. Central Park is not a safe place at night. People have been mugged. Raped. One man was attacked by a group of kids who just wanted to see if they could get away with it—rich kids from the Upper East Side. Some of them got away, but three were caught. *We were just playing*, they said. *We didn't think it would end that way.* Well, that man didn't make it. I don't know what happened to the kids—kids my age—fifteen, sixteen. The news was all over the story for a while and then it wasn't anymore. Something else must've happened and the media's absolute glee followed that new thing. The park at night is dark and quiet, though. If it wasn't for the danger, it would be a beautiful place. I wanted to see where Miah fell. I wanted to listen—hear him crying out. Two months had passed since his dying. It was late February and so cold, my hands hurt. I knew the place—the papers had reported the story for almost a month. There had been demonstrations—yet another black guy shot in a case of mistaken identity. But this had been different. According to the papers, Miah was not just some black guy. He was a rich kid. He was the kid of famous parents. He was loved and attended one of the most prestigious schools in New York City. I read every word, even when Marion tried to take the paper from me.

"You don't need to do this to yourself, Elisha," she said.

"Yes, I do," I said back. Yes, she is my mother. But she doesn't understand. How could she even understand any of it? How could anyone know what it was like? It was all so damned useless. And the stupid papers—how dare they? How dare they measure one life against another.

The first time I tried to walk to the place where the cops shot Miah, a dog ran out from nowhere then darted back into the darkness. I stopped, a long way away from that place—in the dark and in the cold. I stopped, hugged myself hard in the darkness.

And screamed and screamed and screamed.

Carlton

THAT SATURDAY AFTERNOON—I'LL ALWAYS CALL IT THAT. That Saturday. Not “The Day Miah Died.” Not “The Day a Whole Lot of Us Changed Forever.” Not “Saturday, December Eighth.” That Saturday, the snow started coming down hard. I had been sitting on the stoop just thinking of things. That fall, I'd begun to realize this thing about me, this stupid secret thing that I knew I'd never live out or talk about. And then the fall was over and it was starting to snow. A new season. Different weather and the secret getting older and deeper. When the snow started falling, it was wetter and colder than I'd ever remembered it being. I had on a sweater and some jeans and my hiking boots. Maybe I had on a T-shirt underneath, but it wasn't enough. Even my fingernails were cold. I looked over at Jeremiah's building—every window except Nelia's study was dark. I knew Miah wasn't home, so I couldn't go over there. But I didn't want to go inside my own house. My mother was inside and she was probably reading on the couch. A romance novel. She was probably reading about a woman who fell in love with a man and lived happily ever after. The books with the shiny gold letters on them. Always white women. My mother's white and I wonder if she sees some part of herself in those books—wonder if she makes wishes. Or just lets herself get caught up in them before coming back to planet Earth to make dinner for me and my dad and start ironing her clothes for the next week of working. She teaches. My father plays music. They've been together forever. My sister's in England, Oxford. She wanted to get out of New York. Wanted to get away from our tiny family, I guess. Maybe I was thinking about all of this as I sat there shivering and singing real low. Maybe it's because my dad's a musician that I like to sing. There's always been music in my house. That day, I was singing “Landslide”—not the remake, but the old Fleetwood Mac version where Stevie Nicks really rocks. Jeremiah always thought it was strange that I was such a Stevie Nicks fan, but her voice—her *voice*—it did something to you. And no one can do “Landslide” the way she does. My father had turned me on to that song. He plays piano and guitar and a couple of other instruments. He'd sit down with his guitar and just start strumming and singing that song. *Can I sail through the changing ocean tide? Can I handle the seasons of my life?* And there was always such a sadness in his voice, but nothing compared to Stevie's. When she starts going on about the landslide bringing her down, it snaps the heart. So I sat there, singing, trying to do what she did with that song.

But then something strange happened. I forgot the words. I had been hearing and singing that song my whole life, and there I was, sitting in the heavy, wet snow, not knowing the lyrics to a song that was like the *alphabet* to me. And I looked around, starting to feel a panic build up. The block was empty and getting dark. The snow was coming down hard. And then I remember thinking, *And where the hell is Miah?*

The Healing

Norman Roselind

SUNDAY MORNING, I HEAR THE SOUND OF THE *TIMES* HITTING the stoop. It's still early and it looks like it's going to rain. My girlfriend's still asleep. I look over at her as I'm rising out of bed. Her hair's getting gray and her cheeks are starting to puff a little bit with age. Wonder what she sees when she looks at me. I look at my hands, the way they still shake most days, the way my whole body trembles sometimes until I think relaxing thoughts—oceans and forests and cool, lazy evenings. Still, my heart bangs against my chest. And my eyes, I know when a person looks into them, they see only half a man—not completely focused, not completely there. I touch my girlfriend's back, watch my trembling hand move down over it. She's a beautiful woman—brown skinned, dark eyed, enough meat on her bones not to ever be called skinny. Has a voice like something cool calling your name. The trembling slows, then stops, and I rise, pull my robe on over my pajamas and go downstairs to get the paper.

When I open the door, I look up at Nelia's window. I used to be married to her. And we used to have a son. I feel my hands start to tremble again and think, *That's the past now. Move on.* There's a dull ache in my head. I pull the plastic off the paper and look at the headlines without reading them. So much news. So many things to do in a day. So many people to remember. And birthdays and holidays coming up. Eggs and milk to buy. Miah wore a size eleven shoe. My hands. My head. Lake Erie. Lak Cham plain. The way the water laps against the shore on Mon tauk. Miah's brown hands building a sand castle. His thin seven-year-old body. *Daddy, look!* And the wave coming up that afternoon. The way he laughed as the castle melted into the ocean. Where was that? St. Croix? Mauritius?

Nelia's curtains are pulled—they've been that way for some time now. The papers were piling up on her stoop, but now they're all gone. She lives just across the street and a few houses up. It wasn't supposed to end like this. I wasn't supposed to fall in love with Lois Ann. Some things just happen and you feel them happening but you don't have a whole lot of power over them happening. You have to kind of give yourself over to them. Maybe me and Nelia were moving apart for a long time. It's hard to look back on. The edges of the past get fuzzy when I try. Moments come clear—the first time I heard my newborn son cry. The way his eyes changed to the same color as Nelia's and him with parts of Nelia and parts of me all running together to make some strange and wonderful whole new being. He really was *something*.

I sit down on the stoop and try to read the *Times*. The president wants a war. Some businessmen have been stealing people's retirement funds. A baby found, left beside a grade school. The baby's fine. The schoolkids all want her to be named after them. I read this story and even with all of its ugliness, I can't help smiling. Kids are something. All they can see is the beauty in a moment. I sit there like that awhile—every once in a while looking up at Nelia's window. Feel like I've been making films all my life and none of them can tell the whole story. I'd love to make one—just one—movie that goes from the beginning to the end—tell-all. And not that greasy talk-show tell-all kind of thing, but you know, go to the heart—to the heart's heart—and let the world feel everything deep like that.

Now the curtain in Nella's living room moves a bit. I want to say, *Open the window, Nella. Open the doors. Come outside. It's autumn.* This morning is cool and beautiful. The trees are starting to change color. *Look, honey, I want to say. Look how the world is moving on.*

Nelia

IT RAINED THE FIRST MORNING ELLIE RANG MY BELL. IN THE city, the rain makes the world gray and then the sun shines down on that gray and everything echoes of silver. Such a beautiful metal, silver is. And downstairs, Ellie stood draped in it, her thick black hair damp, her clothes wet, her long, thin body shivering.

It's Ellie, she said, looking up at the window. Looking up at me.

Then Ellie smiled. Her beautiful Ellie smile and a moment, a moment from a long time ago draped itself over me: my Jeremiah and Ellie in that spot where Ellie was standing. Ellie turning toward Jeremiah and offering my son that smile. I felt old watching them through the window. Old but excited—like I was fifteen again too and turning toward some boy—who would it have been?—and smiling.

"Ellie," I said. "Ellie, it's good to see you." My voice sounded so foreign to me. An old lady's voice. When had I become old? A birthday had passed, but still . . .

How long had it been since Jeremiah's last day with us—a month, two months, a year. Maybe Ellie knew. Maybe Ellie would tell me.

But once inside, she put her hands in the pockets of her jeans and looked around. The smile gone now. What was she seeing? The gray, dusty inside of what was once a beautiful home. The darkness. One by one, the lightbulbs had burned out. Now I flicked switches and got nothing.

"It's kinda dark in here," Ellie said. And then the smile was back. There was something different about it, though—embarrassment around the mouth and at the edges of the eyes. "How about we light some candles."

She followed me into the kitchen, where I pulled dusty white votive candles from a drawer.

"The matches are over the stove."

Ellie walked over to the stove. To the left of her was the window that looked out over our block. Yellow stained-glass panes across the top of it. A yellow linen curtain hanging from it. Dusty. Still. Ellie pulled it back, the matches in her other hand forgotten.

"He loved the light in this room," she said, her voice almost a whisper. I watched her thin hands reach up to the yellow panes, her pale skin soften in their light. In the cloudy rain-light coming from the window, I could see that her fingers were long and the nails were painted a soft pink. I wondered when she had done this. Late at night? In the morning? Was she thinking of Jeremiah as she brushed the color on? Whom did she make herself beautiful for these days?

She kept her hand on the glass, oblivious of me. The kitchen grew terribly silent, a silence I had come to know too well. And now, with Ellie in it with me, the silence didn't seem to belong. But I stood there in it. Watching Ellie's hand touch the glass. I stood there, wearing the same khaki pants I had been wearing for I don't know how many days, the same white T-shirt I don't remember ever pulling over my head. The day after Miah's funeral, I marched to the Fulton Street Barbershop and had them cut off all of my hair. Who needed hair? Who needed anything? But now, I let my hair

reach up to my head and felt that the hair had grown in some, long enough now for me to grab a handful of it. As I did this, something strange happened—the sun, which had been watery and elusive all morning, turned sharp and bright, spreading a thin layer of brilliant yellow over everything. I kept my hand in my hair and slowly looked around the kitchen—at the yellow dust covering everything, the cedar chairs draped in yellow light, the battered, beautiful wooden table with yellow swimming across it, the white walls looking as though they'd been dipped in butter . . .

Ellie turned then, and for a moment we just stared at each other. The air had left me. I felt ragged suddenly—hollow. I wanted to scream into the yellow light. Yet—it held me . . . up and together.

“He . . . ,” Ellie said again, looking directly at me. “He really did love this light.”

Carlton

SEPTEMBER. THE LEAVES ARE STARTING TO COME DOWN. THE sky—the sky seems like it's just *this* much closer to the earth. It's cool today but still warm enough for me not to wear a jacket. This—this is the kind of day a guy can fall in love with. If I could marry a day, it would be a day in September—the kind of day that makes you feel kind of blue and kind of crazy all at once. But you can't marry a day. My mother married a night. My father. Carlton Sr. Black man. And me, born a color somewhere between my blue-eyed white mother and dark-skinned dad. What if the color white was a day? And what if my mother had married a day instead of a night? Then I'd be all white. I wouldn't be walking through this September day, choking up at falling leaves. Would I be alone?

Someone dies and you hold on to everything you can. I think it's easier if you know they're gonna die—somebody old who you loved—like a grandmother or a sweet old uncle. You watch them die, you expect their death, and while death is coming, you're getting stories from them and touching their skin one last time and smiling and telling them how much you love them. But when someone gets killed—the way my homeboy Miah got killed—shot down by cops in a case of mistaken identity—sounds clichéd even to say it. Wish it was a cliché. Wish it was a dream that I could wake up from and shake out of my head and say, *Now where did that come from*. No. No dream. When someone gets killed, when that someone is this guy you've spent just about every day with since you were this high school senior—well, then you don't see it coming. And all you have to hold on to is what you remember—and the day. The light of it. The weather. You in it. The way everything about it smells and feels and looks. Then you go to bed at night feeling like you lived it, really lived it. Like you walked through the world that day—whole. When somebody dies real quick and unexpectedly like Miah did, you spend every single day, after the news hits you, trying to live. And maybe sometimes you're living with some big secrets over your head or some big regrets in your heart. But the good part is you're walking around breathing and waving hello. And as the days go by and turn into weeks and months and years, you realize how much each day you get through matters.

I take a deep breath and keep walking. Still day. Windless day. Day with so much color to it, my head starts to ache. But then the color softens. It feels as though the whole sky is trying to wrap itself around me. I stop, lean against a mailbox and take small breaths. And it feels like the air is trying to breathe with me. *Calm Carlton*, the air feels like it's saying. *Why you gotta be so high-strung anyway*. But it's not the air—it's Miah. I hear his voice, feel him grinning. Then I'm grinning too. Headache gone quickly as it came. *Why you gotta be so high-strung*.

“Miss you, man,” I whisper.

A little boy passing by me stops.

“You talking to me?”

He’s brown like Miah. Clean-cut. Neater than any little boy should be.

I shake my head and he shrugs and keeps on moving.

You ain’t all gone, are you, Miah?

And the wind starts blowing, soft and high as a song.

At the corner of South Oxford and Fulton, a car swerves to miss hitting a small dog. I hear the dog owner scream and watch her curse the driver out. Then he’s cursing back and the cars behind him are honking and the day doesn’t seem as beautiful as it did a minute ago.

I keep walking. When I get to Vanderbilt and Fulton, I stop and think about grabbing a cup of coffee. At a red light, some scrub leans out of the passenger side of a beatdown Honda and says *He Girl-boy*. He winks at me. I hear the other guys in the car laugh.

“You weren’t calling me that last night,” I say. And wink back at him. The guys in the back start howling and the scrub gets so mad, he makes a move to get out of the car, but the light changes and his friend speeds off.

I keep walking. Girl-boy. Fag. Batty-boy. The list goes on. I’ve heard it all before. I remember Miah and I were walking this one time and some guy he knew from somewhere pulled him to the side and whispered, loud enough for me to hear, “What you hanging with the sissies for, Miah-man?”

Miah had his ball in his hand—the way he usually did. He chucked it to me and grinned.

“Take some inventory, man,” Miah said to the guy. “Everything in the world’s just a little bit deeper than you seeing it.”

The guy walked off without saying anything else. I know he didn’t have a clue to what Miah was talking about, but maybe he walked on thinking about it some. I don’t know.

Did me and Miah ever talk about this? About *it*. About who I really am—you know, way down deep beneath the me that’s part white, part black, a ballplayer, a singer, a pretty-boy?

Nah. We didn’t. We left that stuff alone. We talked about ball and our folks and more ball. And when Miah started falling in love with Ellie, we talked about that—about what it meant to be a black guy who was loving a white girl. And once we got on that subject, it was like—well, it was like that all there was, because he and I could spend hours just talking about people’s reactions and his own fears and what it felt like to just be with Ellie. He loved that girl. I’d sit talking with him and then I’d come home to my parents sitting on the couch, watching TV—sometimes my dad would have his arm around my mom’s shoulders. And I’d think, *Man, I can’t even hardly imagine it, but these two of our people were, like, our age one time and they got some of those same funky stares and comments Miah and Ellie got.*

So with all that going on, where was there a place to say, *You know, Miah, I don’t think I’m the kind of guy that likes girls.*

But now that Miah’s gone, I find myself having all kinds of conversations with him. Telling him when I first started feeling this way, how lonely I’ve been all these years, how all the stuff I don’t say and don’t do goes into ballplaying and that’s probably why I’m on the starting five and one of the best ballplayers in the history of Brooklyn Technical High School. Stupid name for a school that was supposed to be one of the best in all of New York City. Decent ball team, though, and some smart kids running through it.

I miss Miah so much, it hurts—real deep some days and other days it’s just a hollowness. *You’ll get close to someone again like that*, my mom said. It was one of those rare moments when we sat down

the table together—her drinking coffee, me eating a piece of leftover pie. But even though I sat at the kitchen table and nodded as she talked, on and on, trying to make me feel less of the sadness, I knew she was wrong—would always be wrong about that.

You won't always be the beautiful lonely boy you are, Carlton.

Beautiful-lonely—that's what my mother calls me. She knows even though we never spoke about it. She watches me watching people. Watches me walk and sing and talk. Comes to my games and watches me watching other ballplayers. She knows. Looks at me sideways and smiles a little bit when my father says, "When you gonna bring a girl up in this house for us to look at?"

"That's Carlton's business, isn't it?" my mother says. Because she knows. And she doesn't want my father to know before I'm ready to tell. Before I'm a hundred percent sure myself. About this. About that. About everything.

I wish I could love a girl the way Miah loved Ellie, but I just don't think about them that way—girls. I just don't. I try to force myself to—try to imagine my lips on a girl's, my arms around her waist, my hands making designs on her back. But the thoughts drip down into nothing. I feel . . . nothing. I am . . . nothing.

Jeremiah

IN A CLASSROOM IN A SCHOOL AROUND THE CORNER FROM where I grew up, a teacher is explaining death to seven-year-olds. Over the summer, the class hamster has died. A girl in the class has lost a beloved grandmother and another, an uncle. One kid remembers me and tells the class again how this guy he knows was shot by cops.

And he wasn't even doing nothing, the kid says. Just running home from his girlfriend's house.

Death, the teacher says. Death is like sleep.

Maybe there are twenty-five kids in the classroom—they're all colors because this neighborhood is changing fast. Even in the few months since I've died, it's changed. More white people moving in. Old black folks who've been here forever moving back down south or back to the Caribbean. The walls of this classroom are the same, though—painted pale blue. A poster on the wall—a kitten hanging from a bar—and underneath the kitten, the words HANG IN THERE. Another poster with the alphabet written in cursive. I remember being a kid and walking into this room, looking around wide-eyed, holding tight to my mama's hand. The room still smells like chalk. The chairs have names scratched into them. The desks are new, though, particle board and some kind of wood veneer that adds a new smell to the classroom, an unfamiliar one.

A little boy raises his hand. He could be me. Same dark skin. Same close haircut, shaped up on the sides and across his forehead. He's wearing a very white T-shirt and new-looking blue pants. His face is scrubbed and shining with oil. Today's the first day of school. Second grade. Twenty-something second-graders and all of them clean and excited and hungry for whatever is coming.

If death is like sleeping, the little boy says—his name is William, William Carlos—named, yes, for the poet. If death is like sleeping, then how come dead people don't just wake up?

I stare into his teacher's eyes. A flicker across them—she is stumped—but she recovers quickly.

It's a deeper sleep, she says.

Twenty-something pairs of eyes look back at her. Twenty-something children who won't sleep well

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