

ONE BREATH

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SETTING

Seattle Train Station

ARRIVAL

September 6th, 2017

Charlie set the National Geographic magazine on his lap and rested his bifocals atop his salted hair. He stood in the aisle, making way for Tavin to exit row 29. Tavin gathered his backpack from under the seat, inching toward Charlie, knocking the bonnet from the head of the female passenger seated in the row in front of them. He excused himself and continued to the center of the isle. Both men stood in the aisle, uncertain of the appropriate farewell. It was the first awkwardly silent moment they'd had since Tavin boarded the train eight hours earlier. Charlie extended his right hand. Tavin stared at Charlie's hand, recalling their first handshake, how Charlie clutched his hand slightly longer than normal when he'd boarded the train. Tavin did not extend his hand to Charlie this time, instead, engulfing him with both arms. Charlie wrapped his arms around Tavin. Standing in the aisle, they said nothing, for their embrace spoke louder than words. They broke from their embrace at the demand of hurried passengers behind them. Tavin wove his arms through the straps of his backpack, turned and walked down the aisle, exiting the train. He maneuvered

through the Seattle train station, sifting through the sea of passersby. He glanced back at the train, wondering if good karma had finally discovered him. How had a chance seating assignment, 29D, shifted his destiny? Or had it been by chance? Fixated on the possibility of finding Nora, Tavin reflected on Charlie's last words. "Don't let anyone or anything deter you from finding love! Love is paramount, Tavin! There is nothing greater!" Tavin knew he was on the right journey.

Chapter I

Dr. Charlie Matheson

Passenger 29C

Train from Wilsonville, Idaho to Seattle

September, 2017

On Sundays over Labor Day weekend, seventy-eight-year-old doctor, Charlie Matheson, rode the 5:00 am train from Wilsonville to Seattle; a tradition not broken in forty years. There was no need for Charlie to purchase a ticket, for seat 29C was always reserved for him. On Sunday, September 6, 2017, Charlie sat quietly in seat 29C, waiting for the train's departure. He flipped through the pages of a National Geographic magazine, reading an article about the thirty-nine legendary birds found in New Guinea. His favorite was the Ribbon Tailed Astrapia. He was captivated by the unique physical characteristics of this bird, specifically how its tail feathers measured more than three times the length of its body, the longest of any bird species in the world. Charlie's life had been filled with a love for animals, particularly birds.

Raised on a wheat and barley farm in Wilsonville, Charlie embraced the core values of his small town: work hard, be honest, respect elders, and look a man in the eye while shaking hands. He'd led a good and fruitful life, so keeping a secret from his family for sixty years had been no simple task. For the first eighteen years of his life, his father, Charlie Sr., taught him the business of farming. By age ten, Charlie knew planting dates, harvesting periods, and had keen knowledge of mechanics, to keep their farming equipment in optimal working condition. By age fifteen, Charlie oversaw the cultivation,

fertilization, planting, and spraying of crops, which had grown to include canola, oats, rye, flax, and peas. At eighteen, he was well-versed on the limitations and regulations of the Food and Drug Administration. It was his responsibility to make sure the farm was operating within regulations placed on the agricultural industry. In all facets, Charlie was groomed to take over the family business.

Upon graduating first in his class from Wilsonville High School, Charlie accepted an academic scholarship to study veterinary medicine at Cornell University, a decision that did not sit well with Charlie Sr. Charlie's younger brother, Paul, was capable of running the farm, but it was the dream of his father for his first-born son to take over the family business. Mary, Charlie's mother, had a different perspective of Charlie's life. She'd helped Charlie with his homework, daily, year after year, witnessing his aptitude for learning and dedication to academics, but it was her son's fondness for animals that caught her attention. She'd noticed how elated he'd become, at nine years old, when he found the injured gosling limping around the pond on the backside of their farm. Mary drove Charlie to the Wilsonville library, where he checked out books on the anatomy of birds to learn about healing broken bones. She watched for weeks how Charlie woke up before his farm duties, to nurse the injured gosling back to health. He made a small splint for its broken leg and three times a day fed it tender-grass, wheat, and sprouts. After reading the book on the anatomy of birds, which included a complete glossary of Latin medical terms, Charlie named the gosling 'Sanus' - translation = healthy/healed.

"We've got no time to be concerned with an injured bird," Charlie Sr. barked. "Crop season is at hand. Set the bird free and get back to work," steadfastly, his father demanded. After weeks, Charlie removed the splint, releasing Sanus into the wild

as instructed, but the gosling returned to the pond later that evening. Mary tried reasoning with her husband, explaining Charlie had interests and abilities beyond farm life, but her husband would hear none of it. "The boy needs to learn to work with his hands, Mary. We've got a business to grow and mouths to feed! His running around helping maimed animals is taking food from the table and money from our pockets," her husband stated, firmly. "He can keep the bird, but if it interferes with his farm-work, it's gone!"

For the next two years, Charlie watched Sanus grow into a handsome gander, with goslings of his own. He never missed a day of work on the farm, so his father grew to accept his passion for healing animals. Before leaving to Ithaca, New York to begin his education at Cornell University, Mary wanted Charlie exposed to life beyond the small farming town of Wilsonville, Idaho. "Charlie and Paul," she called her sons into the living room after a hearty supper of Guinness Irish stew. "My brother Mark purchased property in Louisiana. I'm sending the both of you down south for the summer to help your uncle restore the property so he can sell it for top dollar. He's going to pay each of you handsomely for your work. You'll be in Louisiana all summer." Mary knew her boys were no strangers to hard work, she'd watched them work the farm during scorching summers and sub-zero winters. She knew New York would be a culture shock for her son, so she wanted to expose him to people and cultures that would challenge him. "Charlie," she said that evening. "Life here on the farm is much different than around the country. There's a lot going on in the world these days, with the Civil Rights Movement, and Women's Rights, too. It's much different from here in Wilsonville. You will see a whole new world in New York. You need to understand who you are, Charlie, and always remember how you were raised. Being

respectful pertains to all folks who earn it, not just folks who look like you!"

Two weeks later, Charlie and Paul boarded a train to Louisiana, a memory Charlie kept locked away for sixty years.

CHAPTER II

TAVIN CURTIS

Eight Hours Earlier

Wilsonville Juvenile Prison, Wilsonville, Idaho

Release Day

After three hundred sixty-five days, Tavin had not grown accustomed to the barking commands and harsh tones from officers at Wilsonville Correctional Facility. After day twenty-one he understood civility and proper salutations would come as short-lived surprises. He'd been educated, by Saxton, the first of twenty-three cellmates, about the lack of etiquette between inmates. Professor Saxton explained on day twenty-one, "disrespect must be challenged with a quick and equal response, lest you be considered weak." Saxton warned Tavin to expect altercations with garden variety, orange jumpsuit wearing thugs but the regularity of disrespect by correction officers was unpredicted and allowed zero retort.

"Inmate W10436, step up to claim your property," the sergeant hollered, his voice echoing off the chalky, concrete walls. Tavin memorized his inmate number eleven days into his year-long sentence. He knew his number had not been called but subconsciously glanced at the band fixed firmly to his left wrist. He pinched the inside of his right wrist, the sharp pain confirming he was not dreaming. September 6, 2016, his release date had arrived.

"Inmate W19762, step up to claim your property!" Still not Tavin's number. Outwardly, his face revealed the same hard-hearted snarl he'd first walked through the cell block doors. Inwardly, however, he could not contain his joy. In less than thirty minutes he would be free.

He thought about Nora's letters. He wondered about her sobriety. In her last letter, she'd be clean for eighty-nine days. Was she still on her journey to be free from the chains of addiction, or had she relapsed again? He noticed the scent of patchouli oil on the envelope of her first letter, so he imagined what she may look like. He envisioned her a hip-chick, with piercings through her nose, bottom lip, and left eyebrow. She would have dark eye-shadow and tattoos on her shoulders, neck, and back. He wondered if she had short, spiked hair shaved on one side, or long dreadlocks with beads and feathers woven through. For five months, they'd written each other. In his last letter, he explained he would be transferred to a different facility to prepare for his transition back into society. He told Nora how excited he was to start his life over back in his hometown of Flagstaff, Arizona. He anticipated her return letter but was transferred before receiving it. He wondered if she'd written back, or if she'd even received his last letter.

Tavin thought about how Nora's first three letters were inadvertently delivered to him. They were intended for an inmate who'd been transferred to a maximum-security facility. When he received her first letter, he told the correction's officer on duty that the letter was meant for a different inmate. "Well, if he didn't bother to tell her he was being transferred, then why should I care," the guard snapped. "Flush it," he instructed.

Tavin placed the letter in a small storage bin beneath his bunk where he'd kept his court documents. Two weeks passed since he'd received her letter. Like most nights, the only respite from dwelling on mistakes from his past was reading. He reached under his bunk, into the storage bin, finding the book he'd been reading, "White Teeth" by Zadie Smith. He opened the book, finding Nora's letter wedged between the pages. He contemplated for a moment, then opened her letter.

Dear Jake,

I know this is going to sound crazy, but as of 6:00 pm tomorrow, I will be 18-days sober. It's the hardest thing I've ever done. I'm hoping I can stay 'clean', but each day brings a different struggle. I hate the word clean because it reminds me of how dirty I've felt about my life. 'Get clean', 'clean myself up'... Every time I say those words it makes me nauseous. After the accident, I just let go. I lost myself, but I am ashamed that I have fallen so far. I want my life back. I am planning on enrolling in the Seattle School of Art. I know it's only been 18 days, but for the first time in years, I see my life being so much different than it was. I just want to make it to day 19.

I know it's been too long since I've written you, but I needed time to get my life together. Since the accident, it seems like happiness has been beyond my reach. But I am learning I can't reach for happiness, that it starts from inside. That

is the same for you, Jake. I know you're in a place where there isn't much happiness, but I hope you are trying to find peace. Our four years together was filled with more passion than either of us knew what to do with. At times, it was earth-shattering but ended by shattering both of our lives. I had to stop blaming you for my decisions and accept my truth. I am an addict, but I was more addicted to you than I was the drugs. Every time I took you back, you lost respect for me and I lost respect for myself. I compromised who I was, but you were okay with that. I couldn't take it anymore. I was watching you kill yourself, and each day a piece of me was dying with you. I am not healthy, but I am getting there. I miss so many things about you, but I don't miss us. We were right for each other, for that moment, but love isn't supposed to feel that lonely. I hope you find peace. I will always care about you.

I'll write again soon.

Nora

Nearly a year passed since Tavin received Nora's first letter. As he waited for his number to be called, his decision was clear. He needed to find her.

"Inmate W10436, step up to claim your property!" Tavin didn't look at his wristband this time. Before standing, he pinched the inside of his right wrist. "Inmate W10436, step up

to claim your property," the sergeant repeated. Tavin took a deep breath and exhaled three hundred sixty-five days of angst. He turned, facing the empty module, staring into the camera. He held up the middle finger of his right hand, for a count of 10. He turned and walked toward the sergeant. "Hey," the officer howled. "It's not too late to add thirty days to your sentence. Until you walk through these doors, you belong to Wilsonville! Do you understand me, inmate?" he growled. The sergeant stood behind an open window, waiting for Tavin's, yes sir, response, customary from inmates when speaking to officers. Tavin offered no response.

He handed Tavin an air-tight, transparent bag, stuffed with his phone and street clothes he'd worn one year earlier. Hurriedly, he tore open the bag. He stripped out of the musty jumpsuit worn by dozens of inmates before him. He slid into his jeans, plain white tee-shirt, and black hooded-sweatshirt. He'd turned on his phone, hoping it retained some battery life, but now it died as soon as it powered up. The officer handed him a stack of papers. "Sign on the dotted line to make sure all of your personal items are accounted for," he said. Tavin scribbled out a signature. "Okay, here is your voucher for a one-way train ticket from Wilsonville Correctional Facility. Take this voucher to the train station and they will issue a ticket to any city on the West coast. Here is a check for one hundred dollars. You can cash it at the Wilsonville Bank kiosk at the train station. You give them the inmate

bracelet on your wrist and they will give you one hundred dollars. Please sign to receive your voucher and check." Again, Tavin signed, making no eye-contact with the sergeant. "Good luck to you. Hope we don't see you inside here again!"

Tavin walked to the door on the far side of the module. A release-officer stood on the outside. He popped the lock on the large metal door. "We'll keep a cell light on for you," the guard whispered as Tavin walked to freedom.

CHAPTER III

Nora

18 Years Old

Bellingham, Washington, 2014

Hadn't karma had its way with me, Nora thought, racing over speed bumps of the emergency entrance to St. Joseph's Medical Center. She recklessly parked between two cars, hurling open the driver's side door, sprinting through the parking lot, bursting through the emergency room doors. A group of patients gathered in the waiting room gazed at the frantic Nora. Her sense of urgency visible, but nothing spoke louder than the blood-splattered windbreaker she'd worn that morning. White earphones dangled from the collar of her reflective windbreaker. More obvious than her love for Googoo Dolls, "Slide", clearly audible from her headphones, were the smeared, bloody fingerprints on the outside of each earpiece.

A male nurse wearing turquoise scrubs noticed blood splatters on her hands and clothing. He inquired about her injuries. Hurriedly, she explained, it was not she who was injured but the man who lay motionless across the back seat of the car. She described his injuries and explained a wheelchair would be needed for the unconscious man. Together, they raced through the corridor, under the breezeway to the parking lot

where Nora discovered the rear passenger-side door open. The injured man vanished.

Why now, she thought? How had *this* day discovered her new life? One year passed since Nora made a promise to live a healthier lifestyle: eat more fruit, hot yoga three times per week, hike twice per month, meditate daily, and no more Jake. NO! MORE! JAKE!

It was not that Nora wasn't a winner, like her father, Allan. She understood success! She told her father after receiving three D's and three C's on the final report card of her freshman year in high school that school simply wasn't a priority anymore.

"Honey," her father glancing over her report card, his face gripped with disappointment. "I know it's been hard since the accident, but it's been nearly three years now. It's about time we begin moving forward. You can't continue using that as an excuse for mediocrity," Allan said on the third anniversary of her mother's and his wife's, death. "Your mother would want us to move forward," he explained.

"You're right, Dad, she would want us to move forward," Nora agreed. She wept.

Allan hadn't looked beyond his own heartache that it had been Sara, her mother, who'd been entrenched in Nora's life.

While he won large settlements for the law firm of Taylor-Anderson-Webber, Sara created math games with colorful flashcards and told stories about dancing Koalas for Nora's spelling and writing assignments. She'd arranged her life around Nora's soccer and volleyball seasons, missing only one game in four years. When Nora made the 12U Eagles Select softball team, it was Sara who made hot cocoa and snicker-doodles for the entire team on the last Friday night of each month during the season. Her father didn't understand Nora could not *move forward* because the hours at the firm blinded him to the special memories Nora shared with her mother.

Four years after the accident, just before Nora's sophomore year in high school, they moved from Mercer Island, Washington to Bellingham, Washington. It was her father's idea of a new beginning. Ms. Hendrickson, the English teacher at her new school, Sehome High, alerted the school nurse: *Nora Taylor seems reclusive and despondent. Unsociable!*

"Hello, Nora," the nurse said, handing her a one-page questionnaire. "It's okay to make eye contact with me, Nora. I can help you if you just...". Nora glanced over the questionnaire, reading only the first two questions:

Circle One:

1. Do you feel suicidal? Y N
2. Do you feel sad or lonely? Y N

Seeing Nora circled "no" to the first two questions, the nurse interrupted. "Are you sure you're okay, Nora? One of your teachers sent me a note saying you weren't socializing with other students and...". Nora shrugged her shoulders, one stream of tears spilling from her left eye, dribbling her truth onto the questionnaire. She grabbed her gray JanSport backpack, weaving both arms through the straps and walked out of the office. "Suicidal! Possible depression!" the nurse jotted in Nora's file.

Nora left school early that day, spending the afternoon walking aimlessly through the seedier section of downtown Bellingham; the area her father warned her to stay away from. Over the first weekend, after their move to Bellingham, Allan drove the two of them around Whatcom County, pointing out the landmarks he'd shared with Sara when they were both students at Western Washington University. Nora and her father spent Saturday morning hiking through Whatcom Falls, one of the more beautiful landmarks in the city. He laughed as he explained to Nora that hikes through Whatcom Falls had been one of he and Sara's favorite things to do when they were students at Western.

After their hike that day, Allan drove them up north, towards the Canadian-US border, visiting the spectacular Semiahmoo Resort. He explained to Nora that Semiahmoo had been

the location of his first "grown up" date with Sara. He told her about the first day he'd met her mother when she worked as a delivery driver for a Vietnamese restaurant. Sara delivered Pho and fried spring rolls to Allan's dorm room during finals, wearing Birkenstocks, baggy sweatpants, a hooded sweatshirt and a WWU baseball cap pulled down to her eyebrows. She stood at the doorway, he explained, as Allan held the door open, waiting for his roommates to pay their portion of the bill. Allan told Nora how cute her mother looked the first day he met her and how astonishing she looked in the elegant black dress she'd worn on their date night at Semiahmoo. No Birkenstocks or sweatpants worn by Sara that night. Instead, she'd worn racy, six-inch black heels and a not so loosely fitting little black dress. Allan detected the scent of Angel perfume trickling through the car on their drive up to the exclusive resort. Their plans for a classy night out on the town quickly turned into a cozy night inside their hotel room. Sara became slightly embarrassed when the girl delivering room service to their room noticed her black dress, heels and lacy lingerie tossed at the foot of the king-sized bed. "Looks like you two are having a fun night," she said, as she Sara ducked under the covers, giggling, as Allan signed for dinner. They never left the room that night.

After their to visit Semiahmoo, Allan took Nora to the

quaint city of Fairhaven, where they ate pizza at Pizzazza Pizzeria. During the summer entering his senior year at Western, Allan was a server at Pizzazza's. Sara and her friends would visit him at closing time, eating the left-overs for the day. Pizzazza's was located a few feet from the pier where Allan had proposed to Sara. He told Nora how nervous he was to ask her mother to marry him. They'd been dating for four years but during the third-year Sara needed a break from the relationship. After eight months apart, they'd rekindled their love, so Allan was prepared to make Sara his wife. He told Nora how beautiful her mother looked that day and that he'd saved up his money from working at Pizzazza's to pay for the ring. Allan insisted he and Nora take a selfie on the pier, with the sunset as the backdrop, the same setting of his proposal to Sara. On Facebook, her father posted the selfie of he and Nora, captioned: "*Here's to a new beginning!*" He received 86 likes. Nora did not post the photo!

On their way home that night, Allan drove through downtown Bellingham, pointing out the seedier areas for Nora to avoid. He'd recalled that year when Sara asked for space from their relationship. She'd worked that summer at a vintage clothing store located in the heart of the sketchy part of downtown Bellingham, the same area he demanded Nora evade. He remembered

how Sara developed a bit of an edge that summer. She got two tattoos: a rose on her right shoulder and the word *Liberation* scripted down the left side of her torso. She'd smoked weed most nights and could be found hanging at grungy garage parties, rather than parties at the dorms with her college roommates. "You've changed," Allan remembered saying to Sara one summer night. "It's like I don't even know who you are anymore," he'd stated!

As Allan drove slowly through downtown Bellingham, Nora sensed a different pace to that part of the city. She noticed kids her age carelessly riding skateboards along the sidewalks and dreadlocked vagrants huddled on every corner. This was certainly nothing like her neighborhood back on Mercer Island. She felt a vibe far beyond the white picket fence that had encased her perfectly manicured life. At the stoplight, she noticed a dark-haired boy standing alone. No skateboard or dreadlocks, just a boy! The light turned green for Allan but the boy walked calmly, crossing the street through the red-light, her father honking his horn in disgust. "You see what I mean, Nora, these are the types of kids in this area. I want you to stay away from here," he insisted. Nora watched the boy walk slowly across the street. She thought about when she was 13 years old and Toby Anderson, 15, asked her to ride on the

handlebars of his new bike. She'd had a crush on Toby since he'd first moved into the neighborhood one year earlier.

"Nora," her father hollered from the front porch that day. "Come inside and get your helmet, Nora! You can go with Toby but you must sit on the seat! Don't ride on the handlebars." Nora come inside but did not return to Toby that day!

Nora walked through downtown Bellingham after visiting the school nurse that morning. Three weeks had passed since her father drove her on a tour through the city. She'd wondered what made the area off limits. She noticed there was no scent of Caramel Macchiatos in that part of town, instead, a strong odor of weed and Nag Champa incense spilling through the doors of smoke shops and old record stores. There were no kids carrying JanSport backpacks or girls wearing Ugg Boots. Nora was certainly out of her element. Or was she? If my father only knew, she thought!

Between visits to record stores, she spotted *that* boy who'd walked in front of her father's car that day. He was not alone like the first time she'd seen him. He stood in a circle of boys who looked nothing like the boys back home or at her new school. They were playing hacky sack and blasting Reggae music from an old Volkswagen van. Nora watched, realizing *that* boy was the reason her father didn't want her visiting this area.

She recalled the day Allan told her not to ride on the handlebars of Toby's bike. "You have to be safe," her father explained that day. Nora approached the Volkswagen van, standing close enough to be noticed. She looked on as they kicked the hacky sack, each of them wearing tie-dyed shirts of varying prints. Except for Jake, he wore a black and green camouflage T-shirt with tan shorts and skater shoes. She'd heard one of the guys call his name. She'd never met a Jake, nor had she seen a boy like him. Jake, she thought. Her daydream shattered as the hacky sack landed directly at her feet. "How about a little help," shouted the dark-haired boy, hearing his voice for the first time. Jake, she wondered!

Nora picked up the hacky sack as Jake jogged towards her. Her gaze, for the first time, landing squarely on his face. She stood speechless, holding the hacky sack. She stared at Jake for a count of seven seconds.

"Are you going to throw me the hacky sack?" he asked. Jake stood in front of Nora, intoxicated by the deepness of her green eyes. "I've never seen you around her," he said. "What's a girl like you doing in a place like this?" he asked. He stood close enough for Nora to smell the essence of Jake. She liked it!

Nora, poised, holding the same glance, responded. "What do you mean a girl like me?".

"The school-girl uniform and the JanSport backpack. You know, a girl like that!" he replied. Nora watched each movement on Jake's face as he spoke. She noticed the dimple on his left cheek was slightly lower and deeper than the one on his right. As he smiled, she noticed his sixth and eleventh top teeth (his canines, her mother, a dentist of 15 years, taught her) were much longer than his premolars and incisors. He had three brown specs in the white part of his right eye (the sclera, she'd learned from Human Anatomy class) and the iris of both of his eyes was the color of beach sand. She remembered sneaking into Katy Thompson's mother's makeup case when they were nine years old, adding mascara to their eyes, pretending to have lashes as long and black as Jake's. She'd heard him shouting with his hacky sack buddies but hadn't detected the softness and sincerity of his speaking voice until he spoke to her. Jake, she thought.

Nora tossed the hacky sack back to Jake. He thanked her as she walked away. "My name is Jake," he shouted, watching her walk away. She smiled!

CHAPTER IV

Ella Mae Tucker

13 Years Old - July, 1952

Brier County, Louisiana

I don't know how my skin turned out so yellow. I reckon both sides of the story is believable, but I like mamma's side cuz it calms my nerves. I got three brothas, each of em older and darker than me but I'm the only one turned out light-skinned. Ms. Maybelle Simmons says "Ella Mae, you sho' do think you special, don'tcha? You think you pretty cuz you light-skinned, like White folk?" I say back to her, "I ain't no different than nobody else, and I'm special cuz I can read and write and add numbers wit the best of em!" She told me the next time I speak sassy to her, she go'n make me fetch my own switch and ware my hide til it turn white as cotton. Then she tell me I'm stuck on myself because my eyes is green as emeralds, and thas why grown men look at me when I walk into town. I cain't help the Good Lawd built me like a grown woman when I was 13 years old, so I've grown used to it. I caught ol' Brotha Harold starin' at me when I was runnin' in the field. He say, "Ella Mae, you sho look sweet as a honeycomb this aftanoon." I know he seen my chest bouncin', so I make sure to walk real slow when Brotha Harold come around.

If Papa was still alive, I bet Brotha Harold wouldn't look at me the way he do. Papa loved me but he always struggled with the color of my skin, always askin' mama if she was runnin' around on him. I overheard him fussin' at mama one night about the color of my skin. "Lilla Mae," he holla'd to mamma that night. "I'ma feed Ella and I'ma put clothes on her back cuz tha Good-Lawd tells me to, but I can't understand how Ella is my child. That child is ripe yella, don't look to me like she got one drop a my blood runnin' through her veins. How you 'spect Ella is my child?"

That was the first time I eva heard mamma fuss back at pappu. She say, "Now you look-a-hear, Nathaniel Paul Tucker. You can fuss 'bout ma cookin', you can fuss 'bout ma cleanin', hell, you can even fuss 'bout my love makin'. But I swear before the Good Lawd, if you keep fussin' 'bout my virtue, I'ma walk out this house and neva look back. Now, I know Ella Mae come to us light-skinned, but she come to us this-a-way. And...."

"Lilla Mae," Papa cut her off. "How you 'spect she come to us this-a-way. Ain't a drop a yella in my blood, and ain't but a speck in yours. That child looks White and Indian, and tha's plain as the day is long. I don't mean to fuss 'boutcha virtue. I just cain't figa' how my otha children are dark as oil, but Ella Mae turned out light-skinned." If it wasn't for mamma's

stern denial of eva givin' her virtue to any otha man, I would believe Papa's side. Soon as I could see a difference in my skin-color, I knew something was wrong.

So many thangs done happened since that day I heard mama and papa fussin' 'bout skin. My oldest brotha, Clarence, got caught up runnin' around wit' a White gal. Clarence is smart as a whip, but I couldn't tell if he had the sense God gave a mule, cuz evrabody in Brier County, Louisiana knows Colored boys don't take up wit' White gals. But I sho' could see why Clarence took a likin' to ol' Jenni Rae Rutherford. She was plum-peach pretty and sweet as suga-cane, but I know Clarence didn't pay no mind to how sweet she was. Jenni Rae was built betta than any grown woman in town, White or Colored. Her hair was long and black as ink, and her eyes was big as blue marbles, and her back-side was stacked up like two loads of firewood.

I heard my brothas talking 'bout her when she walked her pretty White self in front of the house on her way to the White-folk school. Clarence say, "Obadiah, see what I tell ya about Jenni Rae. She look at me evra day and smile." Obadiah, he my second oldest brotha, between Clarence and Albert. Albert, he my third oldest brotha. I'm the youngest, 'the *babygirl*', thas what my brothas call me. But I ain't no regula' kind a girl, scared a bugs or spidas and the like. I just a soon squish a bug than

polish my nails, and I got a left hook that once knocked the front tooth from Jarvis Washington's big mouth. That was the last time ol' Jarvis eva called me a yella banana! Albert say I have to learn how to fight cuz I'm light-skinned, so he teach me how to wrestle and how to throw my left hook. He say I could probably whoop most 12-year-old boys in all of Brier County.

Obadiah kept on workin', trying to pay no attention to how Clarence was talkin' 'bout ol' Jenni Rae. "Obi, look-a-yonda," Clarence say, noddin' his head and winkin' at Jenni Rae. "She still grinnin' at me. I thank she like me, spite knowin' she cain't" he say. Obi stopped hoein' the field. He rested his elbow on the top of the hoe. He say, "Clarence, you thank every girl old enough to like somebody, like you. She ain't grinnin' at you. She just grinnin' cuz she White, thas all. Grinnin' cuz she White. Now putcha shirt back on and help me and Albert finish tendin' to this garden." Obadiah flicked the sweat from his shiny, black forehead and told Clarence to quit wishin' on Jenni Rae cuz they didn't have much time 'fo mamma be home from work. Mama worked for the William's family. She been workin' fo' em since befo' I was born.

"Ah quit ya blowin', Obi," Clarence say. "I done more tillin' in this garden than both you and Albert," he pointed the rusted metal end of the back-hoe at Albert and Obadiah. "We be

done 'foe mamma get home. Don't y'all fret none. We be done soon!" I watched my brothas work that day in the scorchin' Louisiana heat. Horses gallopin' by were heavin' something awful, and sows wrestlin' in the mud were trying' to tuck away from the burnin' sun. Sometimes the heat was downright awful. The devil himself would need a cold sweet tea to keep from suffocatin'.

Papa had fallin' ill so he'd spend days restin' in the backroom. He was the hardest workin' man I eva saw. Even though he questioned mamma about the color of my skin, I still loved him. He fed me, clothed me and took afta me, and neva let anyone talk bad 'bout me bein' so light-skinned. I reckon that was his way of claimin' me.

I was thirteen years old when Clarence got eyes for Jenni Rae. I didn't undastand much, but I sho' knew the ways of the south, just like I knew a left hook from an upper cut. Clarence and ol' Jenni Rae was lookin' at each otha in such a way that was go'n git Jenni Rae locked down in her daddy's storm cellar and Clarence lynched up from a sycamore.

Afta eight or nine months, Clarence called us outdoors, say he had somethin' important he wanna talk about. It's a million thangs I 'spected he coulda told us that day, but I sho' neva thought he would tell us he was fix'n to run off wit' Jenni Rae

Ruthaford. Under the shade of two giant oak trees, in the back side of our property, Clarence told us his plans.

"Me and Jenni Rae leavin' the south," he say. "We loves each other and wants to be man and wife! The south ain't no place for a Colored man and a White gal to love. She knows it and I knows it, that's why we leavin'. We leavin' 'fo sunrise."

I placed both hands over my mouth to keep me from usin' the Lawd's name in vain. "Clarence" I shouted. "Have you lost the sense God give ya? You cain't marry no White gal, you'll be lynched up 'fo you say 'I Do'," I say.

"Now look, Ella, I don't care what the world say 'bout it, ain't nuttin' go'n stop me from lovin' Jenni Rae," he said. "Ain't but three things I'm willin' to die for: family, love and my *one breath*. I know I ain't lived long, but I'm eighteen now and I done learned a few things. The way I see it is God give each of us one breath, and he tell us to do our best with it. I could use my *one breath* fightin' against love, or dying to save it. I choose to save it. I love Jenni Rae, spite knowing it's wrong," he say.

Obadiah was always the voice of reason when Clarence got to speakin' crazy. He say, "Clarence, sound to me like you followin' the desires of ya britches. Now you know papa sick, so

how me, Albert and Ella go'n take care of the family wit' you runnin' off wit' Jenni Rae?"

Clarence turned around, look each of us square in the eye, and say, "Now I already done some thinkin' on this thang. I hear talk that people up North are different from Southern folk. They say a Black man can earn half what a White man earn, and there's plenty of work to go around. I can send money back home fo' the family, mo' money than I could make if I stayed 'roun' here. Plus, mama ain't got to pay fo' me livin' here..." The mo' I listened, the mo' I knew there wasn't no changin' Clarence's mind. Wasn't nothin' we could say was go'n stop him. Mama say it come a time when a boy becomes a man; when he go'n wanna make his own way in life. This was Clarence's time, as he put it: his "*one breath*." Mama say to Clarence last summa, "Clarence, Papa sickness done got worse and he ain't got much time left with us. Docta say his heart been bad since birth, but they cain't do nuttin' bout it now but pray. I'ma need you to quit schoolin' so you can help the family."

Clarence took mama by the hand and say, "Yes, Mama, I be right proud to take up for papa but Mama, seem to me I can keep learnin' and still take up fo' Papa. Papa been workin' twenty five long years, breakin' his back, now he laid up sick. I figa if I use my head, 'stead of my back, I can work 'til I'm an old

man. Seem like the body give way 'fo the mind do, thas why I want to keep learnin'. You and Papa been tendin' cotton since I was on ya hip. I can't 'membra ya doin' nothin' else but field-work. You used to set me in the shade unda the willows when it got too hot, and I'd watch you and Papa work from rise-til-dawn. I got a good head on my shoulders, Mama, and I know I can make it if ya let me. Ain't nuttin' mo'e important to me than ma fam'ly."

Mama didn't say nothin' else to Clarence on tha matter. She turned to me and say, "Ella, quit medlin' in grown folk business. Go'n fetch me some eggs and quit trying to know thangs you ain't needin' ta know. Now go'n fetch me a dozen eggs."

Folks thought I was too young to understand the ways of the south, but I wasn't. I saw the way Papa followed the rules when we rode the wagon into town. Don't look a White woman in the face for mo' than two seconds! Step off tha sidewalk if White folks is walkin' t'wards ya! If a White man speakin', wait five seconds afta he finish 'fo you reply lest you be called an uppity Negro. I asked Papa one day 'fo he got sick, "Papa?" I asked, sittin' on the front porch splittin' the string-beans Clarence and Obi picked from the garden. "Why White folks betta than Colored folks? Even the Larkin family think they betta than

Colored folks!" Them Larkins were the nastiest type a folk I eva met: four boys and one rotten, mean ol' little girl named Tonya. One day last summer, we was all playin' tag down by the river. Tonya Larkin started ramblin' on about how Colored folks ain't good for nuthin! She say Colored folks cain't read, cain't write and cain't add up numbers. I say to her, "Tonya, don't you know you a girl? You cain't go runnin' 'roun' wit no shirt on, like a boy," and I give her my extra camisole from my satchel. Then I say, "Tonya, if you go fetch me a brush, I can brush ya hair so it looks fine for Sunday mornin' service. I got an extra pair of shoes that fit ya feet, so you ain't got to go barefoot." I give her my extra shoes and camisole, and brushed all the snags from her long blond hair. Afta that day, Tonya Larkin neva spoke a word 'bout how Colored folk can't do this or that.

"Ella Mae," Papa say, splitting the last of the peas. "White folk ain't no betta than Black folk, but there are some who think they is. Best thang you can do is always act like you got good sense. Good sense is good sense, make no mind of the color of ya skin. There will always be folk who don't like ya skin; but when they see how smart you are, they gotsta respect ya." I told Papa what I done fo' Tonya Larkin when she went on talkin' bout how dumb Negroes were. "You handled that jus' right," Papa say. "Always fight ugly wit pretty," he say.

Papa, first name Nathaniel, was the best man I eva met. Look to me like otha folk thought the same 'bout him, thas why he was also the sheriff of the quarter. He didn't have no badge or nothin' official, like the White sheriff, but anythang go sideways 'tween black folk in Brier County, they come runnin' to Papa to settle it up. Thas cuz Papa was a fair man. He ain't neva settle on the sides of friends or kinfolk just for the sake of it. And, when the White sheriff need help wit' somethin', he come talk to my Papa. Seem to me he was mo' fair than the White sheriff.

Papa always told me I was the best thang eva happen to his life. I reckon he didn't know how to deal wit how yella my skin was. Some of the elda womenfolk made a fuss 'bout it, say I don't belong to Papa. One day, they had me cryin' somethin' terrible, say I ain't Negro or White. Say I'ma have a hard time figa'n out life cuz I don't belong to nobody. Papa seen't me crying'. This was the first-time I eva seen't Papa stark ravin' mad!

"Now you listen hear, each one of ya," he say, stompin' up the front steps of Ms. Annie May's house. He removed his hat, showin' he ain't lost his manors 'roun' women folk. "If I eva hear talk of y'all fussin' at Ella Mae about the color of her skin, I'ma stop runnin produce fa ya!" Papa had the only horse

and carriage in the quarter, so he made weekly trips to the market to fetch produce and supplies for all the families.

"If I eva hear 'bout y'all speakin' to my child in such a way, I'm cuttin' ya off and you go'n have to figa a way to fetch ya own produce. Make no difference the color of her skin. She mine. Y'all fuss at Ella Mae, mean you fussn' at me. And my wife the only woman who can fuss at me. Now fo' I leave, I right 'preciate if y'all could 'pologize to Ella Mae." I stared 'round Ms. Ainnie May's porch at each of em, wit' they mouths stuck wide open, as if papa had broken some sacred rule by puttin' them in their place. I was grinnin' somethin' terrible. They sat in their rockin' chairs, just rockin' and fannin' themselves.

"But how you 'spect she got green eyes?" Ms. Ainnie say.

"And that curly hair? Look to me this child got mo' Indian blood than Negro blood," Ms. Ma'am say. Ms. Ma'am, which was what she made all the young folk call her, was the Queen Motha of the Gossip Society. If it was to be talked about, then Ms. Ma'am was the one started all the talk. Mama say God give each one of us a talent. I reckon Ms. Ma'am's talent is talkin' 'bout folk.

Been five years since the day papa took up for me on Ms. Ainnie's porch. Hard to believe Clarence and Jenni Rae been gone

for so long. It was just like he said that night under the oak trees, they snuck off before sunrise and ain't neva looked back. But sure as catfish and taters every Sunday afta church, mama get a check in the mail once a month from Clarence. Mama cain't read so well, so I always read the letters Clarence sends to her. The last letter made me right proud to call Clarence my olda brotha.

Dear Mamma,

Jenni Rae sends her love. We are doing well. I have been working three jobs: one for you, Obi, Albert and Ella, one for me and Jenni Rae, and one for our baby. That's right mama, I'm going to be a daddy. Jenni Rae thinks we're having a girl, and that would be right fine by me. If it is a girl, we want to name our daughter Lilly Jo Tucker. I told her you would be proud to have a granddaughter to share your name with, and Jenni's mamas name is Mary Jo.

Mamma, I know you and Papa thought I was crazy for runnin' off with Jenni Rae because she's White, but her folks have come around to treating me with respect. I'm sad that Papa passed away before seeing his first grandchild but I'm hoping you will come out here someday to spend time with us. Me and Jenni Rae treat each other real fine. Love ain't about Black and White, Mama, it's about love. She love me just like you love Papa, and

*I will treat her just as good as Papa treated you. I love ya
Mama.*

Hope, Faith and Love

Clarence

Of all the letters Clarence sent to mama, this was the first time he sent one to me, too.

Dear Ella Mae,

It's hard to believe you're eighteen years old now. I bet you're smart and pretty as a peach. Last time I was home, you were just turning thirteen and talking about going to college. I hope you still want to go to college. Educated Negroes have opportunities, not the same as a White man, but there's opportunity. After I finished college there were plenty of Negro schools here in Los Angeles offering teaching jobs. I teach mathematics on the weekdays, and on the weekends, I teach Negro American History at a Christian School for wealthy Negroes. Now that Jenni Rae is along in her pregnancy, she left her job as an English teacher at an all-girls private school. I started my own business teaching older Negroes how to read and write. Funny thing is, word spread and now I have just as many older White folks in my class as Negroes.

Ella, my heart will always be with you, mama, Obi and Albert, but my family is here now, in California. You are welcome to come visit any time. I'll write again next month.

Hope, Faith and Love

Clarence

P.S. You don't need your left-hook anymore. Your skin is beautiful.