

South of Broadway Bridge

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Don't Shoot

Max had never shot the gun before that night. Didn't think it would happen really. That thing was so off-limits it was like Eve's goddamn apple. Except when Mom found out what happened it was gonna be more than a fall from grace. She was gonna straight up kill him. Then, after that, she'd kill Dad because it was *his* fault the gun was in the apartment in the first place.

It had appeared a couple of weeks ago. Mom, her tall frame even more wilted than usual, hadn't said anything when Dad showed Max how to handle it. Max hadn't paid any mind to her silence. He had never seen a gun so close before, and he was impatient to hold it.

Dad was excited too, which made Max grow even more eager. It had been a while since they had done something together. Dad finally let him hold it after warning him a dozen times about the safety. He said he bought the gun to "protect the family, just in case." Mom didn't seem convinced.

"People get killed for having guns, Patrick. That thing won't keep anyone safe," her voice was calm, but Max knew that was only because he was in the room.

He heard them fighting later that night. Their fights were nothing new, but they had gotten worse ever since Max started at his new school in September. This was one of the loud ones. One of the fights that made Max pray he wouldn't run into any of their neighbors in the morning. The walls were too thin for their shit. Sometimes Max wanted to join in on the screaming, but all that would do was get his ass beat.

He managed to get his earphones in right after Mom screamed, "I didn't marry your white ass so you could run around like a gangster."

He drowned them out with Kendrick and the memory of how the gun had felt when he held it. He liked how heavy it was. How real. The feelings sat in the palm of his hand. Ghost-like.

Max hadn't seen the gun again until last night.

It was spring break, and all the kids from school were on real vacations. Like in Europe and the Bahamas. Movie type stuff. Mom and Dad worked two jobs each and could still barely afford his tuition with the financial aid, so going on vacation wasn't even a dream he'd had. No money meant nothing to do. Nothing to do meant he was bored to shit. Sure, he could watch TV or play videogames, but he couldn't focus on either lately. Every show turned into white noise, and he had grown frustrated and bored with everything he was playing.

It was the Wednesday of break already and he had finished his homework on Sunday. Since then, time had been slipping by at a numbing crawl. Also, Steven hadn't texted him back yet.

He felt like he was going to explode soon, probably. There had been a fog descending over his mind for the past few months. It made everything softer and vaguer and more slippery. It made him feel like he was running around in circles even when he was lying down and staring at the ceiling fan. He spent a lot of time doing that lately.

Max found the gun when he was prowling around the cramped apartment. He wasn't *looking* for the gun. Sure, he knew it was somewhere in the house, but he wasn't *looking* for it. He just happened to find it in the bottom drawer of Dad's bedside table, aka the first spot any kid would look for something they're not supposed to see. The black metal stood out against the loose papers, nail clippers, and old iPod.

Max checked the cracked screen of his phone. 9 PM. Mom would be home soon. After stuffing his phone back into the pocket of his pajama pants, he scooped the gun out of the drawer. It was colder and heavier than he remembered. He studied its body, noted how the light from the bedside lamp hit it. It felt solid and purposeful in a way he envied.

Years of practice had trained Max's ears to hear the sound of keys in the front door.

Gun, back in drawer. Bedroom, closed. Max, trying not to slip on the hardwood floor as he scampered down the narrow hallway. He threw himself onto the couch and assumed a pose of convincing nonchalance—he hoped—as the apartment door opened.

“Hey, sweetie, how're you holding up?” Mom ruffled a hand through his loose curls as she walked by.

He managed to throw an, “I'm good, Mom, thanks,” after her before she disappeared into her room.

Max could barely taste the reheated rice and beans that he shoveled into his mouth at dinner. He couldn't stop thinking about the gun. Every time he saw guns in movies and games—whether they were protecting or destroying—they made something happen. Holding it made Max feel like a part of that.

A black boy being drawn to a gun. So many assumptions were already piled on his back just because of the color of his skin. Why not embrace one of them and meet expectations?

Dad was at work, and he and Mom had been eating in silence since they sat down.

He attempted to start a conversation. “I put the change from grocery shopping on the kitchen counter.”

Mom smiled her tired smile at him in response. “What’ve you been up to today aside from running errands for me? Enjoying your week off?”

“It’s great,” Max forced enthusiasm into his voice, “You’ll never believe what happened in the game I was playing today.”

“Oh yeah? Try me.”

Max rambled about The Legend of Zelda for a while and managed to push the gun to the back of his mind. Mom smiled as he talked, which urged him on. He knew she had no idea what he was talking about, and he hadn’t actually played the game in weeks, but it felt good. He liked when she looked at him and smiled. He liked when she listened.

After doing the dishes, he lay on his unmade bed, and his brain drifted to thoughts of Steven. Steven who hadn’t answered his last four texts. Steven who stopped hanging out with him since they’d started going to different high schools this past September. Max’s thumbs were poised over the screen of his phone, ready to type out another message.

Should he tell him about the gun or should he just reach out again and hope things would be different? They had spent so much time playing Call of Duty at Steven’s place in middle school. He would think the gun was cool. Would want to see it. The thought of seeing his best friend for the first time in ages was enough to prod Max to finally send another text. He did his best to ignore his own unanswered messages that stared back at him from the screen.

[hey do u wanna see something cool?]

That probably wasn’t enough.

[dad got a gun]

Max put the phone face down next to him on the bed and waited. An eternity passed before his phone buzzed.

[deadass???

[yeah u wanna see it?]

Max did nothing to stop the grin that exploded onto his face as they made plans. Steven's spring break wasn't until April, but he told Max he would be able to get out of the house. His dad didn't give a shit about what he did, was what he said.

They were going to meet up the next night in Inwood Hill Park. The rush of relief he felt was physical. He missed Steven. They'd been tight for all of elementary and middle school when they went to P.S. 18 together. Then Mom and Dad forced him to go to a "better high school" than Thurgood Marshall where Steven was going even though Max had wanted to go there too. They hadn't even given him a choice. When Max had protested, they told him that it wasn't "safe" or "rigorous" enough. Just because it was a black school? Just because it was in Harlem? It made him feel like they didn't want him to be black.

His new school, Dalton, was almost an hour away by subway, and it was white as hell. In middle school, there had been times when he was the whitest person in a room, but at Dalton even the other black kids felt white to him. *They* were in Europe and the Bahamas right now.

He hated it there. Sure, he had made friends—that was a matter of survival. They were the other kids in the Math Club that he joined at the beginning of the school year. They were alright at first, but he started hating even them recently. Hated their money, hated the way they carried themselves like they belonged everywhere they went. Sometimes he hated that he couldn't be more like them. When he was at school at least. He hadn't gone back to Math Club since before Christmas break.

The classes weren't even that hard. Weren't "good schools" supposed to be tough? Dalton wasn't, but he still felt a wave of nausea every time he walked through the front doors.

He would give anything to not go there anymore, but that wouldn't happen. Well, not for another four years at least.

At school, he wished he were invisible.

At home, he wished the apartment wasn't so empty. Wished someone could see him.

Mom talked about "staying out of trouble," Dad talked about "going to a good college," and his best friend barely talked to him at all.

Max was done sitting on his ass about it. Steven was going to hang out with him tomorrow.

"Did you finish your homework?" was Dad's version of "good morning."

He had asked every day since break started, even though Max had told him on Sunday that he finished it all. Sometimes the kids at school would tell stories about fights they had with their parents. They would tell their dads to shut up and still get what they wanted in the end. If Max tried that Dad would bring out the belt. Their worlds were different from his.

"Uh huh," Max mumbled the affirmative around a mouthful of cereal.

"You sound like a little punk when you answer me like that," Dad snapped.

Max sighed. "Sorry."

Dad was starting to get fat, and he looked older than thirty-four. Lines had appeared on his face in recent years, and he was already starting to go gray. If Max didn't know the truth, he would've guessed that Mom's younger brother, Uncle Harris, was ten years younger than Dad even though they were the same age. Max prayed to God that he would age like the black side of his family. Only the tired look in Mom's eyes and the stoop in her shoulders betrayed the fact that she was well out of her twenties. Did her dark skin stop the wrinkles or was it something

else? They learned all about melanin in biology class the other day, and everyone had looked at him.

Dad repeated himself as he pulled on his coat. “Did you finish your homework?”

“Yessir.” Max tried not to sound annoyed.

“Good. Stay sharp. Don’t forget to do the dishes.” And he was off to his day job at the diner.

Max spent the whole day counting down to midnight, the time that he and Steven had agreed to meet. Mom was at her security job and wouldn’t be home until 5 AM. Dad would be back from bartending at 3 AM. It would be enough time. The minutes crawled, but whenever he looked at the time on the cable box, the hour drew nearer.

It was only a fifteen-minute walk to get to the park from his apartment, but Max—unable to sit still any longer—left at 11:30 PM. Even a stop in the Park Terrace Deli only stalled him a bit. The gun was stuffed in his belt and hidden by his jacket. Out of sight, but not out of mind. He had never been so aware of his own presence, felt so visible, as he did in the small bodega. He usually felt safe and at home in the narrow aisles, but today he didn’t belong.

But no one knew, he kept telling himself, no one saw.

Max arrived at the soccer field where they agreed to meet by 11:50 PM. It was cold out, and his denim jacket did little to protect him from the wind. Whoever’s idea it was to put spring break in March had probably never stepped out of their goddamn house.

It was darker out than he had expected it to be, so he hung close to the warm glow of a street lamp on the edge of the field. There was something about midnight that made the shadows deeper than usual, and he wasn’t used to being out alone this late. Add that to the list of rules he was breaking. He had a curfew for a reason. People got jumped out here. The fuzziness in his

brain lifted a bit at the realization. Dad would kill him if he got mugged, and Mom would have a heart attack if she knew where he was. He was safe here though. He had a gun after all.

Was Steven late? The thought of him not showing up made Max's stomach turn. He was about to check his phone when he caught sight of someone approaching under one of the streetlamps. His hand twitched toward the concealed weapon. As the silhouette solidified, Max let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in.

Steven hadn't changed much in the past few months. He was wearing a red hoodie and black jeans. His sneakers, as usual, looked like they were fresh out of the box. The amount of love he put into those things was ridiculous. Max couldn't keep track of how long he'd been wearing the same pair. The only changes he could see in his friend were that he'd gotten a bit taller and gotten a new haircut. It used to be buzzed, but now he was sporting a faded cut that ended in short dreads at the top of his head. Max ran a hand through his unruly curls that had been the same for as long as he could remember.

"You scared me half to death," Max said once Steven was in talking distance.

"You're the one who wanted to meet at midnight," Steven was smiling despite his accusatory tone.

Max's heart swelled.

"Why you *think* I wanted to meet this late?"

"You have it then? You're not fucking with me?"

Max pulled up the side of his jacket in response. Steven whistled.

"Shit, boy... Shit!" His eyebrows jumped. "Is this what they're teaching you at white boy school?"

Max ignored the question. "Let's move. It's fucking cold out."

Max started walking and left Steven to follow. If they went farther into the wooded area of the park they would be safe. No one would be around except for drug dealers and deadbeats. Normally that wouldn't be good, but the gun was a comfort at his side. Max breathed in deep, relishing the sting of the chill air in his nose. He felt hard and dangerous.

"Where you been, man?" Max tried to keep the whine out of his voice.

"Chill, chill I'm here now. I've just been hanging, doing homework, you know." Steven shrugged. "What you been up to?"

"Same. Just hanging with friends," Max lied.

It was strange, walking like this when it was so late out, but Max kind of liked it. When Steven asked if he was still playing basketball—it was basically all they had done every summer since forever—he shrugged and made an excuse about having too much homework. The truth was that he had wanted to join the team at Dalton until he realized that everyone expected him to because he was black. So, he had stopped playing.

"How're the folks? Playing nice?" Steven asked.

Max sent a pebble flying ahead of them and watched it disappear into the dark.

"It's not too bad," he lied again, "How's Jessica?"

Steven scratched at his stubble. "We broke up in November."

"Shit sorry, man. I didn't know."

"It's aight."

"You didn't tell me." Max wanted to add that it was because Steven had been ghosting him for months.

"You obsessed with me or something? Gotta know everything about my life?"

Max was surprised and hurt by Steven's sudden outburst. He strayed from the paved path they'd been following and cut into the trees. Steven followed.

Max's head was roiling. The fog—forgotten while they were talking—was thicker now than ever before. It wasn't *fog* exactly—he could see just fine—but he didn't know what else to call it. Everything just felt dull. Wrong.

They stopped when they reached a small clearing. Steven leaned against a large rock and crossed his arms. He was wearing an easy half-smile now, with no trace of what had just happened on his face.

“If I didn't know better I'd think you were aboutta try and jump me.”

Max let out a half-sincere laugh. “Watch out, man, I'm not a pussy.”

The second the cold metal was pressing into his palm he felt a bit better. The gun was more real than the trees around him. More real than Steven.

He aimed it like Dad taught him to and pulled the trigger. The safety was on but still, it felt cool. He tried a few more poses. Two-handed, sideways, trick-shot.

“What're you gonna do with that thing other than wave it around like a fool?”

Max turned toward Steven who flinched. Max laughed a real laugh. Steven had always been the intimidating one before. He pulled the trigger again and mouthed, “pow” before turning away again.

“Don't be a douche, Max.”

Steven was scared of the gun, scared of Max holding it, pointing it at him. The darkness of the woods was crystal clear, and the air was colder than ever. That was when the dog came. It was medium build with short gray fur and a white leash trailing from its collar. Time slowed down as Max pointed the gun and switched off the safety. He pulled the trigger again and was

rewarded with a sharp *CRACK* and less kickback than he had expected. Time started moving normally as Steven's shrill voice sliced through the air.

"What the fuck? Oh, my God what the *fuck*?" Steven was staring from Max over to the dog and back.

The dry dirt was littered with cigarette butts that Max kicked away as he walked, dazed, towards where he had shot.

The dog was still breathing. Quick shallow breaths, wild eyes, blood. How had he not expected the blood? So much of it already and still spilling into the dirt with every passing second. Gray fur and then red red red. Between its rasping, uneven breaths, he could hear it whimper. Its blue eyes were rolling in its skull, trying to focus on Max, on anything.

"Winston!" A yell came through the trees.

The world sped up.

"We gotta get the fuck out of here." Steven's voice was trembling.

The dog was gnashing its teeth. More blood.

"Winston! Where are you, buddy?" The cry came again.

Max pointed the gun and shot one more time. The whimpering stopped.

Tears sprang to Steven's eyes as he shouted, "Are you fucking crazy?"

"It, it was gonna die anyway," Max stuttered, "It was in pain."

Steven stared at him with wide brown eyes. His mouth worked open and closed for a moment as if he were trying to speak. Max didn't realize his own hands were shaking until it took him a long fumbling moment to switch the safety back on. Without a word, Steven took off at a run in the direction they had come from. Max stuffed the gun back in his belt and started after him.

Max tore through the trees, dodging naked branches the best he could. He only caught a few glimpses of Steven's back until they finally broke out from the woods onto concrete. The gun felt awkward at his hip as he sprinted. Did the man find his dog? Was he following them? Had he called the cops? A black boy running with a gun. *Two* black boys running with a gun. No matter how white his school was or how white his dad was, Max was still black. If only he could shed his skin. Just for a moment.

"We should walk," he panted, "We look like criminals."

"Speak for yourself," Steven spat, breathing heavy, still running, "*I'm* not a criminal."

"Tell that to a fucking cop, man."

Steven stopped, and Max used the last of his strength to reach his side. The only sounds were their own labored breaths and the drone of late-night cars. Max started walking and, for the last time, Steven followed. They walked towards Broadway, which meant they would be out of the whiter part of the neighborhood soon. Max avoided eye contact with the few strangers they passed.

Soon they were standing in front of the Park Terrace Deli. Max didn't know what brought him back there. The bodega was so familiar, the lights inside so warm, that all he wanted to do was go in. Mom always told him that he should go into the nearest store if he ever felt unsafe. Shit, what time was it? He had to get home before Dad did.

Max jumped when a hand clamped down on his shoulder but relaxed when he saw that it was just Steven.

"I'm going home. I better not see your ass in the news tomorrow morning."

Max watched Steven's back until he was out of sight. Unsure of what to do with himself, and still feeling drawn to the security of the bodega, he pushed his way through the glass door. He was greeted by cool, artificial air and speakers leaking bachata.

Max wasn't hungry, but he browsed. The more normal he acted, the better. He could feel the gun pressing against his side. A few other people were in the store, but it wasn't busy. Could anyone else tell it was there? Max wandered down the toiletries aisle, past the laundry detergent, paper towels, and dish soap. The lights weren't as warm as they had looked from outside. Their fluorescent glare was starting to burn his eyes, and a sour taste coated the roof of his mouth. He tried to swallow it down. No way in hell was he gonna let himself throw up. That would draw too much attention.

The bullet had made a wet and hard sound when it hit the dog. It played on repeat in the back of his mind. The sour taste was getting worse. He had just wanted to stop the whimpering, that was all.

Max wished violently that he was in his bed at home, under the covers, too-bright screen of his phone close to his face as he scrolled down his Twitter feed. What the fuck was he doing in the bodega in the middle of the night with a gun?

What he saw in the pet food aisle made him stop dead in his tracks. The man's white skin was pinkish against his navy-blue uniform, and a gun was holstered proudly at his side. Max backed away, trying not to stumble. He caught the eye of the owner—large, bald, arms crossed—as he staggered into the door and left. Could the man see his guilt hanging around him? Was the police officer going to follow him? He wasn't just walking while black. He had a gun. A gun that he had used.

Max didn't stop walking until he was halfway across the Broadway Bridge. The few cars that sped by took no notice of his presence. Alone, standing above the whirling waters where the Harlem River met the Hudson, Max finally breathed.

If he stood there, breathing, staring into the water, nothing else would have to matter anymore. He wouldn't go home, he wouldn't go back to school, he would just breathe. After too much and not enough time passed, Max checked his phone. It was 2 AM, which meant Dad would be home in an hour. Steven hadn't texted him.

Max finally removed the gun from where it had been nestled in his belt. It felt hot in his hand even though he had fired it a while ago. The black metal winked up at him in the yellow light cast by the streetlamps. Without letting himself think about it any longer, Max hurled the gun over the side of the bridge.

It was hard to keep track of the small shape as it tumbled dozens of feet. Max blinked tears out of his eyes and tried to focus on the gun before it was lost to the green-gray waters. He wanted to go home, but his legs were locked. Even though the gun was gone, he couldn't tear his damp eyes from the water. He felt drawn to its uncertainty. The air felt nice now even though the wind stung his face. He couldn't fathom the amount of trouble he was going to get in for losing the gun, but he didn't care. Steven wasn't on his mind at the moment and neither was school. All he had was the sound of water and the sound of cars.

Max teetered back and forth, toes to heels to toes, hands gripping the dirty guardrail as he took in a few more deep breaths. After taking a couple of halting steps, he began the walk back home.

Zaria

I still think about Zaria even though I know I'll never see her again.

* * *

I met her two years after I ran away from home.

By the time she was in my life, the wound of my existence had become a tough scab. Some nights when the sounds of people, fighting, loving, living drifted through the window of Carlos's apartment, I would pick at the scab. Test it. It bleeds less now, but there are still moments when the past seeps into the present and paints it in regret and the feeling of things lost.

Maybe the scab will be a scar soon. I treasure all of my scars. I like remembering them. Whether it's from when I fell off my scooter when I was six (my left knee, fading now) or from that bastard with the knife almost two years ago (my right side, big and ugly), each one is an escape. It's amazing what time can do to pain. How it can leave only the good behind. My parents rushing to see if I was okay and the taste of ice cream. The grim satisfaction of survival and meeting the man who gave me a second chance.

I think it was a normal day up until the point that I saw her. I was hanging around the projects in Marble Hill, people watching probably. Maybe hanging around a bit and soaking in the sun after making a delivery. It's funny how details can escape you even when they were to vivid at the time. How everything can just melt away and leave nothing but her face behind.

* * *

My life was a constant state of waiting in those days. I still don't know what I was waiting for.

To wait is to grapple with an interesting beast. On some days, it was so easy I could forget my apprehension and just live. Other days, I could barely bring myself to leave the sanctuary of my sleep. I would try to lose myself in the floral pattern of the apartment's wallpaper and hear nothing but the sound of traffic from outside. Those were the days when I would bite my lips until they bled. I liked the sharp metallic taste. I wanted to be like that.

* * *

Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if I just let her walk by. She was minding her own business, but it was clear to me that she didn't belong. Her glance was furtive and darting. When I looked at her I felt that she had no destination and nowhere to return to. I recognized myself. At least how I used to be before Carlos.

Even with her hesitant eyes, she carried herself with pride. Her back was straight as if daring the world to beat her down. I could go on about how proud and distant and above it all she looked, try to tell you she was different than everyone else. But, to be honest, she was beautiful and that's what drew me to her.

* * *

I have a routine in my life now, and I guess you could say I have someone to go home to. Most of my routine is walking, some of it is begging, some of it is running drugs for Carlos. I used to spend most of my time playing volleyball and studying. Doesn't sound like much, but I liked it, and I was good at both of them. I like the walking now that I'm used to it. I like watching people live.

The first few weeks after I left were the worst. I didn't like the idea of going to a shelter. It felt like admitting defeat. Like I wasn't strong enough to get through everything on my own. I spent a few scattered days in a drop-in shelter in Harlem, but I never stayed for long. I didn't

want to feel like I belonged there. I didn't want to belong somewhere for people who don't belong.

I was lucky to meet Carlos before the winter came. It meant I was able to spend my nights on park benches and outside of Subway stations. I usually tried to find lively places to sleep. I liked the sound of activity. And I realized that, even though I was so present, so different from everyone walking by, no one gave me a second glance.

* * *

It was mid-April when I met Zaria. The brick wall of the building I was leaning against was cold on my back, and the air was mild and still. I let my eyes slide over her body as she passed me by. Her head was shaved and she was tall and thin. My mother would have sucked her teeth at "all the skinny girls these days."

"Curvy is better." She would tell me. "Real women are curvy."

She was, of course, telling me who to be, not who to want. Everything about my mother was large. Her voice, her height, her curves, her laugh. I always admired her presence, her body.

A group of three kids stopped the girl before she could go on her way. I'd seen them around before, actually knew one of them decently well. Marcus. Annoying kid, but he liked playing the punk more than he liked actually getting into trouble. I'd been by his apartment more than once to bring his mom drugs. Nice woman. She didn't ask questions about how old I was or why I wasn't in school. Gave a tip too.

And here was her kid and his little crew of other fourteen-year-olds running around acting like they owned the projects. I unstuck my back from the wall and walked over to them.

I arrived just in time to hear her snap, "Fuck off."

“Don’t be like that, Ma. I’m just tryna make conversation.” Marcus’s words rolled out of his mouth with lazy confidence.

I reached up to put a hand on her shoulder. She didn’t even turn to look at me.

“Get the fuck outta here, Marcus, or I’ll tell your mom you’re cutting class again.”

“Chill, Sis. It’s Saturday,” one of the other boys laughed.

“Want me to tell her to look under your mattress then?”

It was cliché at best, and I’d never been in Marcus’s room, let alone under his bed, but it was all I could think of on the spot. Marcus blanched, and the easy smirk disappeared from his lips. Was he serious? Actually keeping porn/cigarettes/a flask/whatever under his mattress? I held in my laughter.

“We were just fooling around, Kat. Don’t be a bitch,” Marcus whined.

It was hard to focus on him with the feeling of her shoulder under my hand. When was the last time I had touched someone? She felt warm and solid and alive.

“You keep your shit under your mattress?” The boy who hadn’t spoken yet guffawed. “I bet your ass your mom knows.”

Marcus muttered something under his breath that I couldn’t hear as he ambled away. His friends followed, continuing to tease him. The girl moved her shoulder a bit, and I let my hand drop to my side. I could still feel her in an electric tingle that danced on my palm. I rolled my hand into a fist to keep the feeling from slipping away

* * *

No one ever taught me that parents are required to love their kids, but I grew up thinking so. I guess that’s a testament to my childhood. My parents loved me. Their only child. Their only daughter. We lived on 204th and Sherman Ave in Inwood near Inwood Hill Park. We moved to

Jackson Heights when I started middle school, but I was drawn back to Inwood after I left.

Maybe it was the familiarity bordering on nostalgia. Maybe I wanted it to feel like coming home.

The day I fell off of my scooter I was in the park with both of my parents. I remember that it was summer. It was the kind of day where you can see the heat radiating from the pavement in gravity-defying rivulets. It must have been a weekend because my father wasn't at work, but I don't know for sure.

The sun was hot, and I loved the way it beat down on my shoulders and the top of my head. My parents sat on a bench in the shade. I rushed over to them now and then to make them feel the heat that had gathered in my tightly braided hair. They smiled. I have my father's smile, I've been told, and I think it's true. It stretches our round cheeks and pinches the corners of our eyes.

I don't remember how I fell, and I don't remember the pain, but I do remember crying until my parents came. My tears were soothed by gentle cooing. "Kathleen, baby, are you alright?" and "What happened, love?" and promises of ice cream.

The memory is one of my favorites even though it reminds me of times I can't go back to. Being in that moment always makes me feel as safe as I did then.

My parents' relationship began to sour around the time I entered middle school. Weeks after we moved to our new apartment my father got laid off. Instead of job hunting he would just stay at home and drink. I didn't know he had a history of alcoholism. Didn't know this wasn't the first time. My mother said we moved for me, so I could have an easier commute to school. Her eyes were always full of blame, so I began to avoid her.

There was less laughter in the house, fewer smiles. They still looked at me, but they saw me less than they used to. I didn't cry for help anymore, and they didn't come running.

The scar from falling is on my knee. A shade paler than my medium brown skin. It'll fade entirely someday.

* * *

One day Zaria too will just be a story I tell myself. I'll worry her away until only the softness and the warmth are left. Erase her addiction, her anger, her silences. Will her thorns disappear with enough time? I don't want her to become just a memory. I don't want her to become easy to forget. I remember the nights when I would stay up, staring at her back as she slept next to me on the mattress on Carlos's living room floor. She always slept so easily, especially after tripping. Those were the nights I had the most trouble falling asleep.

The high was so good, so calming, and safe. Sometimes I thought I was dreaming. But I would stay up for hours afterward, watching the rise and fall of her breathing. Wanting to reach out and touch her.

* * *

After Marcus left I wasn't sure what to do other than start walking. I fought down a smile when she jogged a few paces to catch up to me. I had no goal in my rambling walk, but we ended up on Broadway heading downtown. She was silent, waiting for her cue from off-stage to finally speak. I looked at her out of the corner of my eye as she walked beside me. I had just turned eighteen, and she looked around my age. Her nose was flat, and her skin was dark. Her hoop earrings looked large in her small ears, and I wondered if she hadn't sold them because she didn't want to or because she didn't need to.

It was only after we walked for a few minutes that I noticed she had a slight limp. I said nothing but started heading across the Broadway Bridge towards the bodega. Maybe Carlos

would let me snag some painkillers or at least let her sit down for a while. I tried to not walk too fast.

“I’m Zaria.”

Those were the first words I’d heard her say since “fuck off.” Her voice was low and I wanted to hear more of it.

“Kat.”

“I know,” she scoffed, “That kid called you that.”

I turned to her and ended up getting caught by her brown heavy-lidded eyes. I wish I had something poetic to say about her eyes, but they were just straight up pretty.

I didn’t realize she’d been waiting for me to respond until she averted her gaze and said, “That’s a pretty name.”

It’s not a pretty name, but I thanked her.

“Do you live around here?”

Did she want me to? Did she not?

I opted for some of the truth. “I live near Inwood Hill Park.”

“That’s a great park. I’ve been there on a couple of class trips.”

“How about you?” I ventured, “Do you live in the area?” I knew she didn’t.

“Downtown,” was all she said.

“Oh, downtown. I’ve been there on a couple of class trips.”

I could feel her looking at me, and I forced myself to look back. After a long moment, she began to laugh. Her smile was wide, and I noticed that she had a snaggletooth to the right of her two front teeth. Zaria’s smile is one of the things about her that really is perfect.

Before our conversation could continue, we arrived at the glass door of the Park Terrace Deli.

* * *

My parents found out I was gay because I told them. Probably not the smartest idea in retrospect. I knew my father was homophobic, but I had hope for my mother. I was scared to tell them, but I couldn't hold it in because I thought I was in love.

Her name was Alexis, and we were in the same ninth-grade class. She had long brown hair that fell down her back in loose waves, green eyes, and a nose that was crooked from a bad fall during gymnastics. She let me kiss her one day during lunch. Then she let me kiss her a few other times. A lot of times. So, I was in love.

I was fifteen when I came out.

If you think the phrase “deafening silence” is a lie or an exaggeration you’re wrong. And lucky to have never experienced one. My blood must have been rushing in my head, going past my ears. That or my brain was yelling at itself. The air was loud and tight and thick and impossible to swallow. I couldn't hear myself think, and it was so hot. Hot in a way that squeezed my brain and didn't let go.

So yes, it was deafening. And it felt endless. It is endless. That silence is still there between us, and I don't want to face it again.

“Kathleen, what are you saying? How would you even know that? What are you trying to do?” My mother's questions were full of accusation and disappointment.

“You think you can sleep under my roof and say that shit?” My father was sober, but his voice had the same dangerous edge that it did when he wasn't.

I wanted to interrupt them, defend myself, but any words I had cut at my throat and lodged themselves there.

“Go to your room,” my mother’s voice was low, and she wouldn’t look at me no matter how hard I tried to catch her eye, “We didn’t raise you to be like this.”

Next to her, my father wouldn’t take his cold gaze off of me. I forgot how to move.

My mother’s voice broke when she screamed, “How could you do this to us after everything we’ve given you? After everything *I’ve* given you?”

Do you know how dirty it makes you feel to have the people who are supposed to love you find you disgusting? It makes you want to disappear. Makes you want to become invisible so everyone can forget you. So you can forget yourself.

They didn’t kick me out, but I left within a year. During those months, I would stay out late and come home to bottles smashed against the walls and my mother’s raised voice. So I started to stay out later. I stopped doing my homework, started falling behind in classes, stopped going to practice. When I finally left, I wrote them a note saying I was going to stay with a friend for a while.

I thought about going to Alexis. We weren’t seeing each other anymore, but we were still friendly. The more I thought about her though, the more I hated her. How could she understand what I was going through? If she hadn’t let me kiss her, and hold her hand, and look into her eyes the way she let me look into her eyes maybe none of this ever would have happened.

I was wrong to think that.

* * *

The first nights on my own were the hardest. I was so scared to sleep, so scared to let myself be vulnerable, that I would just walk. I would walk until I stopped seeing the city and just

felt the pavement pressing through the soles of my shoes. At first it felt like everyone I passed was looking at me, but I eventually realized that they didn't see me at all. Were too busy looking at my ragged appearance to actually look me in the eye.

There were times that I slept, but it was never a full sleep and never at night. I would bundle myself on the side of a busy street and hear every footstep, every voice, as I tried to rest. I never asked for money, but sometimes I would wake up to a few dollars and a few coins.

I stayed at the drop-in shelter a few times, especially when it rained, but I was never there for long. I was always drawn back to upper Manhattan, couldn't quite get away. It felt like there was a reason for me to be there. Thank God, I met Carlos. Though I do wish we could have found each other in a different way.

I don't know why I was stabbed, but I do know that Carlos saved me. Being stabbed was nothing like I thought it would be from what I'd seen in the movies. It must feel like fire, I thought, or lightning, or like the worst splinter in the world. Something like that. It felt like a punch, pressure in my side. Then I saw the blood. That was when the pain came. I couldn't cry out. I wanted it to be gone. *I* wanted to be gone. If disappearing would let me feel nothing then I would disappear. Maybe that would make everything better.

I was on the ground. Shouting and hurried footsteps. The night was dark even though there were streetlamps. The darkest it's ever been.

Carlos told me I was passed out when he got there, waving around the gun he keeps under the counter for emergencies. We were in the parking lot right next to his bodega. He was glad to find that I was alive, and he did his best to stop the bleeding with his hoodie. I'm lucky that he's the type of man who would save a stranger. I'm lucky that I reminded him of the daughter he hadn't seen in years. Isn't it funny how broken people find each other?

“I’m gonna call 911,” he told me, “It’ll be okay, kid. You’ll be in the hospital in no time.”

His words pulled me out of the mire of semi-consciousness that I had fallen into. I didn’t want to go to the hospital. If I did I would end up with my parents. They would hate me even more, but they would take me back. They would be glad that I was alive, I think. I don’t know if I would have the strength to leave again.

I’m not sure if I managed to speak. And if I did I’m not sure what I said, but Carlos must have understood something. I still don’t know where he brought me instead. Maybe he’ll tell me one day, but I won’t push him. I respect him too much for that.

I woke up in his apartment with the chill of a fever and fire in my side. My first few waking breaths felt strange, like I had to learn how to breathe again. Pull in the air, let it out. I tried to move but was punished by unbearable pain. After one more try, I contented myself to observe my surroundings instead. Try to determine whether or not the person who saved me did it for all of the wrong reasons.

The walls were home to framed photos of Jesus and floral wallpaper in muted greens and pinks. It made me feel like I was in my grandma’s apartment in Harlem. I tried to tell myself that that wasn’t a good enough reason to feel safe, but I began to relax. The bed that I was in was large, and it took up most of the space in the small bedroom. There was a bedside table made out of fake wood to my right with a glass of water sitting on a coaster. The room had two doors, one at the foot of the bed and the other one to my right, past the bedside table. The blinds were drawn over the window to my left, but some sunlight managed to leak through. I closed my eyes and listened to the sounds of traffic that drifted in from outside.

I fell asleep like that, listening to the cars. I don't know how long I slept. There were a few times when I woke up but it was never for long. The apartment was always empty. I was able to keep down the rice that he left on the bedside table every day by the time he was home and we finally met.

Carlos is a large man, about a foot taller than my 5'3". He's one of those light-skinned Dominicans. Middle-aged with a thin beard and bald head. I don't remember him introducing himself, but I do remember his offer for me to work for him in exchange for food and a roof over my head.

I didn't go back to Carlos for a week after I left. I was hesitant to trust him no matter how much I wanted to. Why would he want to help me? There was nothing in it for him. Now I know that his wife left because of the drugs and took their daughter with her. The last time he saw his daughter she was sixteen, like I was when we met.

Once I finally did look for him, I had rolled the possibility around in my mind so many times it was like a piece of sea glass. Smooth, no sharp edges, comforting to hold.

That was over a year ago, and I've been working for Carlos ever since. I was scared to come out to him, but I did it within the first few months. The possibility of him finding out some other way made me feel sick. What if he kicked me out when I was finally starting to feel at home? When I did tell him he was so unbothered that I thought he hadn't heard me.

I think I became something of a daughter to him. I remind him of her, of what he used to have.

* * *

Some of the tension left my shoulders as Zaria and I walked into the bodega. The narrow aisles were well-lit and fully stocked, and the speakers pumped a constant stream of music into

the air. The warm brown of the floor and counters filled me with security. No matter what, I was always safe here. There were a couple of people shopping, and Carlos was behind the counter, his arms crossed over his broad chest. His eyes flicked in my direction, and a question rose in them when he saw I wasn't alone. A woman came to the counter with a box of tampons. I dragged Zaria away from the door.

"What are we doing here?" She spoke in a whisper.

"I don't know what you're doing, but I'm browsing."

Insecurity and defensiveness were beginning to take over. Why did I bring her here? Instead of meeting her eyes, I became absorbed in pretending to read the nutrition facts of a candy bar. I wanted her to leave. The longer we stood there, the more the feeling grew. What made me trust her? Why was I trying to help her?

"This is my favorite," she murmured, holding up a package of black licorice.

The second thing she told me about herself.

"Licorice tastes like ass," I said.

"It's an acquired taste."

"Yeah if you wanna acquire a taste for ass."

"I guess you know what ass tastes like then."

She had backed me into a corner. I was exhilarated.

"What's going on over there, Kat?" Carlos's gruff voice saved me.

I walked up to the counter with Zaria on my heels. Her movements were hesitant now that it was clear she was on my turf.

I pointed to her with my thumb. "I picked up a stray, and she's hurt."

"I'm not a stray."

Carlos ignored her. “What d’you want me to do about it?”

“Got any painkillers?” I asked.

Carlos scratched his beard and gave me a hard look. Without taking his eyes from me, he produced a two-pack of generic brand ibuprofen from behind the counter.

He finally looked at Zaria. “What happened to you?”

“Nothing. Just sprained my ankle.” Her voice was tight.

She reached out. Carlos waited for a moment before dropping the paper package into her palm.

“Kat. Bring this delivery to Mrs. Gonzalez for me. If she says it’s less than usual tell her she can pay more if she wants more.”

He handed me a brown paper bag. I hated Mrs. Gonzalez, and he knew as much. She never tipped, and she always tried to get a few more pills out of me like I was a drug vending machine or something.

“Introduce me to your new friend when you come back.” I could hear the grin in his voice as he called after us.

* * *

The first time Zaria and I got high together we snuck some Oxy out of a delivery. The guy we were bringing it to, Derek, was always so gone that he wouldn’t notice a few missing pills. That was what I told myself at least. I felt a twinge of guilt lying to Carlos, but Zaria had kept asking since that first delivery, and just one time couldn’t hurt.

It would be a lie to say I’d never thought about sneaking some of Carlos’s drugs before. I’d only ever smoked weed, but I missed it. Missed the world being softer and farther away for a

bit. One of Carlos's biggest rules was that I stay sober. He said a dealer was the last person who should be using, and I'd be out on my ass if I ever stole from him.

That high was the safest I'd felt in years. Imagine being wrapped up in a warm blanket when you know it's cold outside. Your legs feel weak, but it doesn't matter because you're floating. Floating away, floating above. It's so warm. Like a lover's embrace. All you have to do is close your eyes. I didn't know what euphoria was until that first high. Afterwards I dreamt of it until we popped pills again. I still dream of it sometimes.

She was the only one who I felt that safety with. The only one who shared that warmth.

* * *

"You wanna tell me why you're following me around now?" I asked Zaria as we walked to Mrs. Gonzalez's apartment.

"Don't you want me to?"

My face heated up.

"Maybe I do," I admitted.

"You're honest," her voice was so low I thought she was talking to herself. She looked at me. "What's in the bag anyway?"

"Percocet, OxyContin, stuff like that." I felt compelled to tell her. She probably wouldn't snitch.

"Do you ever use?"

"Nah, not for me. I just help Carlos."

She held something out to me. "Want some?"

The pack of licorice. I took a piece even though I knew she stole it from Carlos.

It was bitter but almost sweet.

* * *

I don't really remember the first time we kissed, but I do remember that it felt right.

Carlos wasn't working late for once, but he was out drinking.

"Don't make too much trouble with your little girlfriend."

He was out the door before I could protest. I couldn't help but smile though. Zaria wasn't my girlfriend—we'd only known each other for a little over her month—but I sure wanted her to be.

She was lying down on the couch, flipping through one of Carlos's books. It was in Spanish, and she couldn't understand Spanish, but she'd been turning the pages for the past few minutes. She didn't show any sign of noticing Carlos's words. I stared at her for a while, unable to help myself. She was lying on her stomach, chin propped on a slender hand, with her legs bent and waving idly in the air. The way she lay there, stretched out and lounging, struck me as so perfect and right that it took me a moment to finally bring myself to speak to her.

"Are you hungry?" was all I could muster.

We ended up eating reheated pizza and getting high. She wanted to try snorting the tablets so they would work faster, but I was too scared of leaving any traces for Carlos to see. So we swallowed them down and waited. Zaria always took more than me.

I don't know how long we'd been sitting there, riding our own highs, when I finally leaned over and kissed her. She didn't resist me, even leaned in a bit. She was warm and soft. I held her close, but she still felt far away. When I stopped kissing her, she blinked a few times and smiled before letting her head drop onto my shoulder. I had never felt so much peace.

* * *

In the beginning, we spent most of our time talking. She told me that she loved to dance, that she barely remembered her mother's face because she'd left her and her father over ten years ago. I told her that I used to be on the volleyball team, that my parents hated me for being a lesbian.

"You figured that out so young!" she exclaimed.

I was taken aback by her tone. She sounded more impressed than anything else.

"Fifteen isn't that young."

"Still, it takes some people ages to get there. How did you know?"

I didn't want to tell her about Alexis. "You're talking like you're seventy instead of seventeen."

She shrugged. "Just take the compliment, Kat."

We were strolling uptown through Marble Hill towards Kingsbridge. We were sober, which was kind of nice. I could see her clearly on that day. The way she would swing her arms as she walked, her long easy strides. The way her eyes roved over storefronts and peoples' faces, interested yet detached. When she looked at me, the sun was lost in those eyes. They were too dark, too deep, for the light to sparkle in them. I could never look away first. I didn't know how.

"What about you?" I tried to keep the want out of my voice, "Are you gay?"

She let out a short bark of a laugh. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

That was a week before we kissed.

Have you ever wanted something, wanted someone so bad that you'd rather live a lie than know the truth? In my head, Zaria was mine, and I wanted her to stay mine. Even if it meant never touching her, never holding her the way I wanted to. I closed my eyes against the sun. We walked.

* * *

I tried to stop taking Carlos's drugs after a couple of months. I couldn't tell if he was beginning to look at me differently, hesitate more before handing me one of the paper bags, or if it was just my paranoia. I didn't want to lose what little I had.

I brought it up to Zaria a couple of times, but she would just laugh it off.

"None of those druggies are gonna notice a little difference," was always her defense, but it never quite sat right.

I tried to stop once, even though she didn't, but I missed the high. Missed feeling safe. Watching her bliss out while I was sober made me feel like I was losing two things at once. I tried to touch her once, hold her like she often let me, but she was far away. She looked past me, like I wasn't there. Her eyes were focused on something I couldn't see. She smiled, but it wasn't for me.

The next time, I joined her again.

* * *

Zaria convinced me to walk through Inwood Hill Park with her on a clear June evening. I had been there a decent amount since I left home, but I always tried to look without seeing. Without remembering. The trees were always there. The dogs, people, and grass too, but I wasn't. I tried not to be, at least. Zaria made me be present. We were tripping, and the world was shimmering. I swore to myself that it was the last time. I couldn't let Carlos find out. Couldn't let him down.

Zaria held my hand as we walked. I felt sick, giddy, exhilarated.

The park was buzzing with activity. People walking dogs, kids playing soccer and baseball, picnics full of plantains, rice and beans, chicken. The world was louder than ever, but I

felt like I was a part of it. I looked at the grass where I had played, the trees that I had climbed, and it didn't hurt like I thought it would. It simmered where I expected it to burn.

This was where I used to run, go to the playground, ride my scooter. This was where Kathleen grew up.

We walked deeper into the park, to where the trees were closer together and the people were farther apart. We sat on top of a rock. Once of those boulders that are the sites of adventures for so many kids. I don't know how long we sat there. I forgot Zaria was with me even though her hand was still in mine. Was this what I had been waiting for? The air cooled as afternoon turned to evening.

I could feel Zaria looking at me. Or was she looking through me again? I don't know how long we stared at each other like that. The rock was warm with soaked up sun. Or were we sitting on the sun itself? Had we finally floated that far away?

Eventually Zaria spoke. "Do you love me?" Her voice was firm but held a fragile edge that was unlike her. Steel and glass.

My throat was dry.

"The first day we met you looked at me like you loved me."

I could barely hear her over the roaring in my head. I wanted to leave the park. I wanted to run and scream and disappear. Instead I remained still. I couldn't hear my own thoughts over her expectant eyes.

So I kissed her. I knew how it felt, to kiss someone, to kiss Zaria, but this time it was different. She was so real and human and there. She kissed me back. For a minute. Or two. It wasn't our first kiss, and it wasn't our last, but I think it's the one that I'll remember most.

"Do you love me, Kat?" she asked again.

Her breath felt strange on the fine hairs above my upper lip. The world became iridescent as the sun dipped below the horizon. I tried to imagine how it felt, becoming one with the water and melting way until you're gone. The smell of dirt and damp wood brought me back. The feeling of the sun beneath me. The sounds of squirrels and birds and bugs. I felt all of it. I sank into it.

"I love you," I said.

I wish it had been a lie. I wish I had been saying what she wanted to hear instead of what I wanted to say. If that had been the case maybe it wouldn't have hurt as much on the day when I woke up to find her gone. She didn't say she loved me back, but I had to tell myself it was true. I wanted her to love me in the same way I wanted to disappear.

Do I love her now? It's too late for that to matter.

Critical Afterword: How to (not) be Seen

Introduction, *noun*: a preliminary explanation prefixed to or included in a book or other writing; the part of a book which leads up to the subject treated, or explains the author's design or purpose (*OED*)

I am fortunate enough to have lived the type of life that is as uninteresting for me to write about as it would be for anyone to read about. Though my identity is not one of privilege, I have led a privileged life. Coming out to my parents as lesbian was nerve-wracking but far from disastrous. I grew up in a middle-class two-parent household where both sides of my racial and ethnic identity were represented. I was not always comfortable with my sexual or racial identities, but I have had the opportunity to figure myself out in safe and supportive spaces. My thesis has been a way for me to explore different aspects of my identity under pressure. I am not Max and I am not Kat, but they are both a part of me.

Before I even started writing *South of Broadway Bridge* I knew that I was interested in what it means to be seen and how that is affected by being a sexual and/or racial minority. Minority experiences cannot be universalized, and that is not my intention. Rather, my aim is to explore two separate characters with two distinct lives. Both stories draw on different parts of me. *Don't Shoot* is partially about the difficulties and dissonance that a person can experience as a result of their biracial identity. *Zaria* addresses some of the realities that are faced by queer youths when they are rejected by their families.

Inwood, *noun*: a predominantly Dominican neighborhood at the northern tip of Manhattan Island in New York City; gentrification has been transforming the

neighborhood slowly for years but has not yet taken full hold; bodegas are replaced by wine bars, but people still blast bachata from their cars

Inwood, the neighborhood where *South of Broadway Bridge* takes place, is where I was born and raised. The more locations I incorporate into my identity, the more Inwood becomes a part of me. I did not realize the extent of this until I was well into writing my thesis. Neither story started out taking place in Inwood, but they both migrated there by the final drafts. There are a few reasons why I felt it was important to write with Inwood as my location. One reason was pure practicality. I know Inwood better than I know any other parts of the world. I have grown and changed as my neighborhood has grown and changed. I have been in the Park Terrace Deli and walked across the Broadway Bridge countless times.

Writing about Inwood in the contemporary moment is also like writing a time capsule. The racial makeup of populations and neighborhoods fluctuate as they are gentrified and lower income residents are forced to relocate and make a foothold somewhere else. I have watched as bodegas and delis have closed because of rent inflation and been replaced by coffee shops and high-end restaurants. The Inwood I am writing about now will not exist as it is for much longer. The slow-moving process of gentrification leaves the neighborhood in a liminal state. Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* is about a black community in the Hamptons. Whitehead's novel is also a time capsule, and not just because it is about the 80s and written in the 2000s. When asked in an interview about the state of the community recently Whitehead responded,

...it has changed in the ways you would expect. Fewer empty lots and more houses.

Bigger houses. Some of the original families have sold their places, so there are more new people. More white people. The kids all wear bike helmets. We didn't wear bike

helmets. We didn't wear bike helmets when we were kids. That's why we're so colorful now. (Treisman)

The way he speaks about the bike helmets shows his nostalgia and how even the smallest changes can feel large. Even a community that is already in the Hamptons can and will become gentrified over time. I am not writing about the past, but one day these stories will no longer be contemporary. They will be a testament to how things once were in Inwood even if it is only a change as seemingly trivial as the Park Terrace Deli being replaced or the kids all wearing bike helmets.

(In)visibility, *noun*: the quality or condition of being invisible; incapacity of being seen / versus: the state of being able to see or be seen (*OED*)

Being seen, not being seen, and how you are seen by others. All of the above play a role in the lives of individuals who are part of minority communities. As soon as you deviate from the mainstream American default (the cis, straight, white, able-bodied, neurotypical, middle to upper-class male) in any way, your position in the realm of visibility becomes precarious, slippery. Those who are different are at times simultaneously seen and unseen. For example, the only black person in a country club will likely be more visible than the typical white patron because of their difference. Despite this increased visibility, they are not necessarily being seen as anything more than the color of their skin. This is hypervisibility. My goal is to highlight underlying structures of discrimination that exist and can affect peoples' lives. These structures are may not be overt, and they have been combatted by those in communities who suffer from them, but they are still present in society. They can still play into peoples' lives.

One of the reasons it is so important that *South of Broadway Bridge* takes place in Inwood is because Max and Kat are brown bodies in a brown world. Their race does not marginalize them like it might in another community. For Max, his concerns with visibility are tied to the new white community of his high school and the loss of Steven, his intimate connection to the black community. The community he wants to remain a part of. For Kat, it is her sexuality and her homelessness that complicate her relationship with visibility.

In the chapter “First Thing First” of her book *Inconsequence: Lesbian Representation and the Logic of Sexual Sequence*, Annamarie Jagose explores the fraught relationship between lesbianism and visibility. Though Jagose’s writing is specifically about gay women, I find that her thoughts are still pertinent when applied to other minority groups. The lesbian is not alone in her struggle to be seen. Jagose discusses, “the ambivalent relationship between the lesbian and the field of vision” and the resulting struggles with representation and representability (2). It is not only that the lesbian is invisible but that she is difficult to represent. Jagose goes on to clarify that this ambivalence is caused by the “difficulty...of specifying lesbianism *in its own terms* without reference to the relational fields of its others” (2-3). The “others” referenced are the fields of gender and sexuality—more specifically femininity and homosexuality—that overlap in the lesbian identity. The lesbian is set apart from other women because she is gay, but she is set apart from gay men because she is a woman. That is not to say that gay men are not marginalized in society, merely that gay (white) males are more hegemonic in the queer community than lesbians are.

Don’t Shoot is not about the lesbian’s role in the realm of visibility, but Max too has an “ambivalent relationship” with the “field of vision.” Part of what I thought about while writing his story was how the stress of feeling simultaneously seen and not seen can affect an individual.

Max struggles with feeling seen as nothing other than a black body when he is at school, yet he fears being seen as white by Steven. He fears how a police officer will see him whether or not they know he has a gun, and he feels that his parents sent him to Dalton because they don't want him to be in a black community. Max and Kat both experience invisibility, but they also grapple with its flipside, which is hypervisibility. As I stated before, hypervisibility occurs when one is seen *as* their difference. Max is hypervisible at school because of how he feels defined by and seen as the color of his skin.

Kat's homelessness is more than just a plot point of *Zaria*. Homeless people are both invisible and hypervisible in that passersby are likely to notice their nonconformity but not to consider their humanity. Even without taking her homelessness into consideration, Kat's place in the realm of visibility is even more threatened than Max's is. Her existence is precarious because of the interaction between her gender identity, her sexual identity, and her racial identity. "For the lesbian," Jagose writes, "the labor of resignification is exponentially increased, as femininity is itself a category under erasure" (6). Femininity, homosexuality, and blackness are all categories that are vulnerable to erasure because of their deviation from the "norm." A body like Kat's, where multiple such identities intersect, occupies an exceptionally shaky and small space in the world.

My go-to answer when asked (by everyone) what my thesis was about was, "intersectionality." Not only was it true—though broad—but it was an easier answer than trying to explain at length what my stories were about. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality in 1991 in her paper "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." She explained years later in an interview in 2014 that she, "wanted to come up with an everyday metaphor that anyone could use" (Adewunmi). Her

goal was to make it possible for people to discuss how their identities interact in their lives and how these overlaps increase and complicate the ways in which they are marginalized. Crenshaw wrote “Mapping the Margins” to address how violence against women of color is not caused by just their gender or just their race. The problem, according to Crenshaw, is that even though, “racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (Crenshaw 1242). Being a lesbian of color, such as Kat, adds yet another layer to her experiences of marginalization. Later in the 2014 interview Crenshaw said, “women of color are invisible in plain sight” (Adewunmi). The idea of being “invisible in plain sight” is akin to hypervisibility. Though you are in plain sight, you are invisible because the parts of you that are seen are only the parts of you that others view as deviant instead of who you actually are. Max experiences this when he feels like the other kids at his school see him as nothing other than a black body. Kat experiences this with her homelessness and being pushed away by her family.

Intersectionality is more than just a term that tries to explain to the outgroup that oppression is more complex than it may appear at first glance. It also outlines how individuals can be marginalized *within* their own minority groups. Early on in “Mapping the Margins” Crenshaw writes:

The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences... the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class. Moreover, ignoring difference *within* groups contributes to tension *among* groups. (Crenshaw 1242)

Even minority groups have “norms” that are possible to deviate from. Kat’s character is an example of the tensions that can arise due to intragroup differences. Despite the fact that they are both black women—ignoring the flesh and blood factor—Kat’s mother cannot see past her sexuality, and it causes a rift between them. Crenshaw writes, “because of their intersectional identity as both women *and* of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one *or* the other, women of color are marginalized within both” (1244). As a person of color in a neighborhood like Inwood, Kat does not suffer because of her color. She does, however, suffer within her community because she is a lesbian.

As I have grown, my relationships with my sexual and racial identities have fluctuated. When I was a child, I did not think much of either. Most children are not concerned with sexual orientation, and I was fortunate enough to grow up in a diverse neighborhood and go to a diverse elementary school. My childhood friends were biracial, and both of my parents were present, so I never felt the pressure to choose between being white or being Haitian. By the time I was in high school I began to view race as unimportant. If the color of my skin did not matter to me, why should it matter to anyone else? I felt above it all and did not truly understand why others felt differently.

Fast-forward to May 2015 as Darren Wilson walks free after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson. I call my parents and ask my dad to never leave New York City because America is not safe for him. I am thankful for my brother’s light skin, the fact that he does not look as black as he could. In *Don’t Shoot*, I wanted to show how aware a fourteen-year-old boy like Max has to be of how his blackness makes him a target. How “I can’t breathe,” “Hands up, don’t shoot,” and the danger of “walking while black” have to be on his mind even though childhood is meant to be a time of innocence and self-discovery.

Incognito, *adjective*: unknown; whose identity is concealed or unavowed, and therefore not taken as known; concealed under a disguised or assumed character (*OED*)

In its early stages, *Don't Shoot* was inspired by Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*. Like Whitehead's novel, Max's story was about friendship and how young people can find each other. The original ending involved a group of four friends banding together despite all odds. Each draft after the first resulted in the elimination of one character until only Max and Steven were left. Needless to say, those two do not unite by the end of the story. The more I wrote and rewrote, the more I realized that Max's relationships with others were actually the least of his concern. He thinks all he needs is to win back Steven's friendship when the root of the problem is his relationship with and how he views himself.

A big part of writing Max's character was trying to understand the dissonance that his biracial identity causes him to feel. My experience of race has been fluid throughout my entire life, both in how I see myself and in how others see me. It does not influence my self-identification when a stranger assumes I am Dominican or Puerto Rican instead of half Haitian, but I have still struggled with finding stability. As I write this, I still do not feel secure in figuring out which spaces—black, white, or mixed—I truly belong in. I am white, but I am also black. I am mixed, but that does not place me in a cohesive community due to the multitude of identities that the term encompasses.

Adolescence is an integral stage in the formation of identity. In "Forced to Choose: Some Determinants of Racial Identification in Multiracial Adolescents" Melissa Herman explains, "Adolescence is a time when awareness of identities and belonging increases. Identities are the meanings that individuals acquire through social interactions and as such are crucial to

understanding a person's sense of himself or herself" (Herman 731). Adolescence is only a small portion of life, but it is a formative one, and the opinions that teenagers form of themselves and of the world end up being a baseline for the rest of their lives. Adolescents such as Max who identify as biracial (or interracial or multiracial) can experience complications in the process of their identity formation that their monoracial peers may not.

Even though he has always been biracial, Max has not always felt so conflicted because how he is seen by others was not as important to him as a child. His feelings are further complicated by his new, mostly white school environment. While his "awareness of identities and belonging increases" he is placed in a physical space and community where he is different from the "norm" and feels like he does not belong. The attraction that Max feels to the gun is also a result of his adolescence. Alongside being a time of stress and identity formation, adolescence can also be a time of limited freedom. Max feels trapped at a school he does not want to attend and in a dissatisfying home life. The gun is one of the options that society provides to fix the pain of alienation.

The study outlined in "Forced to Choose" found that, as a result of navigating more than one racial and cultural background, "some [adolescents] learn to negotiate the intricacies of more than one social group and become more skilled socially as a result; others resolve their conflicting loyalties by identifying only with one group or by adopting a fused biracial or bicultural identity" (Herman 732). Max is still navigating this stage. He grew up in Inwood and went to a diverse school, so he does not identify with his whiteness as much as he does with his blackness. The main white influence in his life up until this point has been his father who he does not spend too much time with. He is only practiced in navigating the social group that Steven is his last connection to. Losing Steven is the same as losing his strongest connection to the

community that he knows and identifies with. Without Steven, he feels stranded in his new white world. Herman writes, “negotiating racial or ethnic identity represents a burdensome and problematic addition to the already complex process of developing a healthy identity” (Herman 732). Any burden that an adolescent like Max experiences can play into the formation of their identity and how they interact with—and feel about—themselves and the world and people around them.

Influence, *verb*: to affect the condition of; to have an effect on (*OED*)

Outside of my academic life, I have mainly read fantasy novels, a genre that is practically married to a white, heterocentric, male-dominated mold. For most of my career as a writer, my work has followed suit with what I read. It took me a while to realize that most of the authors I was reading were straight white men who were writing stories about characters that resemble them. One of the reasons the fantasy genre has always attracted me is because of its promise of escape. All forms of fiction—including realism—can act as agents for a reader to temporarily inhabit a world other than their own, but, to me, fantasy was the most surefire way. How could the real world force itself on me when magic, curses, and swords were in the way. It took me years to realize that the structures I was trying to escape, such as sexism, racism, and homophobia are often internalized in fantasy. I have read almost no fantasy stories that have characters who I can relate to on levels of identity. I started trying to find stories to read that are not white, male, and heterosexual, but it was—and is—a struggle. Part of what I aim to do as an author is to help fill that hole.

Though a decent amount of my academic reading has fallen into the white male canon (in terms of both authors and characters), there were certain texts that lead up to me being able to

write *South of Broadway Bridge*. The texts that most inspired my creative work were ones that deviated from this canon. As I already stated, Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* is a big part of what influenced me in writing *Don't Shoot*. While I did not read *Sag Harbor* for a class, I was introduced to Whitehead by my New Black Arts Movement class through one of his other novels, *Zone One*. That same class was also where I read *Fledgling* by Octavia Butler. The genre of my thesis is realism, but—as someone who is used to writing fantasy—*Fledgling* struck me with how it approached blackness in the genre of vampire literature. *Fledgling* helped me begin to question my approach to writing within a mostly white, hetero, male genre. Just because something is a norm does not mean that you need to follow it. In my opinion, something being a norm is a good reason to try and work against it.

On top of mainly writing and reading fantasy, I am more used to writing and reading young adult literature. Aside from a creative writing class I took at Bryn Mawr that was focused on children's and YA literature, I have had to step out of this comfort zone in my academic career. I struggled with flirting with the line between writing YA and writing stories *about* children while working on *South of Broadway Bridge*. June Jordan's *Soldier: A Poet's Childhood* is about Jordan as a child, but it is not aimed towards children. In *Soldier* Jordan manages to capture a young person's voice while also bringing in the bigger picture in a way that a child, such as the young Jordan, would not be aware of. I tried to emulate this ability in my own writing. Max and Kat have their own world views and ways of being, but I tried to keep the stories from being too constrained by their voices.

In Conclusion, *adverb*: lastly; to sum up (*OED*)

Writing *South of Broadway Bridge* was a personal process for me as much as it was a creative one. I learned how to ground my stories in reality and become intimate with characters whose identities overlap with my own. I was worried at first about incorporating theory and critical framework into *Don't Shoot* and *Zaria* because I had never done so with any other stories. As I delved into the infinite amount of critical works that exist about race, gender, and sexuality, I realized that I had been thinking critically the whole time even though I did not actively know it. Because of the world I live in and the body I live in, I have to approach every day with a critical eye. I prefer to consume and produce media that I feel represents me and others who live outside of the mainstream, so it was not a large leap to apply critical thinking to my natural writing and thought processes.

The most I can hope for is that someone reading my stories can see themselves in my characters and know that they are seen no matter how much it may feel like they are invisible.

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