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We speak slow, like Cynetta's drawl, lazily allowing syllables to fall from our tongues. We walk slow, often dragging our feet, making screeching marks, the backs of our shoes thumping against the floor. We don't hurry, we don't rush, we barely walk. When Kate first came here, she said we just kinda glide, ghost-like in the hot sun. I think it takes age to glide. I think back to when I was a kid, or when Daddy was a kid, all growing up on this muddy river, this piece of fresh smelling land, we ran back then as kids, but then we grew up. It takes age to know you don't have to hurry, not in this red, ripe sun that bears down on us, just take your time and get to where you're going – glide.

I grew up somewhere between Lula and Lexa on the Mississippi. I know you don't know where that is, and you shouldn't. Kate didn't know where it was before she came. And she never sought me out and said Krystal, tell me about it, I just did.

"We define 'little provincial town'," I told Kate, "We keep it simple here only because we're afraid of change. Underneath us all is something different, something we're afraid of." She looked at me like I had opened a new revelation for her. Wide eyes with a slight grin. She was one of the new ones, the ones that didn't come here because they had too, no Kate came because she wanted to. What she seen on TV, the poverty stricken neighborhoods, the rising crime rate, teenage pregnancy and drug infestation was something she didn't believe from afar, that was inner city stuff to her. So, Kate wanted to immerse herself in it, away from her happy world up north where "everybody like me is us and everyone like you is they". She wanted to smell it for authenticity, interview every person and peak in every corner to go home and tell her friends, yes, it's real.

I had stayed after school for quiz bowl practice and asked Kate if she could give me a ride home.

"So where do you live?" she asked.

“Over the levee,” I said, pointing to the back road, “go that way.” She pulled her dusty blue station wagon away from the school campus and onto the narrow back road, a straight stretch lined with trees and no lane markings down the center.

“Will I be able to get home from this way?”

“Yeah,” I said meekly, though I didn’t really know. I was unsure of exactly where she lived. I knew the area the district had arranged for all the Teach for America teachers to live in. It was near the courthouse, post office, and river walk that made up our downtown. They lived in the historic houses, with elegant refinishing and elaborate gardens, all lined on the crumbling brick streets. I spent my life wondering what the inside of those houses looked like and where were the families that owned them but never visited.

“So have you given any thought to where you want to go to college?” I turned to face her. She smiled at me, happily grinning behind her tortoise shell glasses, hands positioned perfectly at ten and two on the wheel, her dirty blond curls creeping away from the clips that held them back.

“No,” I said, turning back to stare out the window. She reached her hand over and poked my shoulder, “sure you have,” she said. “I can tell you’re quite intelligent, I know you’re going somewhere.” Somewhere? What did she know? Sure I knew a bit more than the average student at Central High, but she failed to understand – I was more like them than I would ever be like her.

“I don’t know, I guess Hendrix or the U of A at Fayetteville. Make a right,” I said and pointed to the intersection ahead. We had just crossed the levee. “Now you’re in what is considered North Helena, all the houses are built high up off the ground, cause before they built the levee the tide from the river came in and flooded this area.”

“Umm,” she said. I was telling her the history she desperately wanted to know. She darted her head, quickly turning, searching for something else interesting to catch her eye so she could collect more interesting facts and tidbits of information from me. It was interesting to her, not the reasoning for the town being the way it was, but that the fifteen year old girl sitting in her car knew this. Kate and the other teachers had been brought in because Phillips County was academically distressed, meaning someone wasn’t doing their job. It very well may have been us as students or the parents at home, but as a final desperate attempt to keep the school district out of the government’s hands they brought in the young Ivy League graduates to “educate us”. It seemed to me though, that Kate needed some educating. She wondered about senseless things, such as why our parents weren’t saving for our college educations when they barely made enough to put food on the table. She wondered why half of her classes were on a forth grade reading level, she even wonder what the green vine was that grew on every hill that stretched around the county. “Kudzu,” I told her and pointed, “the brown house on the corner.” She pulled into the driveway and parked the car as if she meant to stay.

“Well thanks,” I said, unbuckling my seat belt, rushing almost to get away.

“You have a really nice home.”

“Thanks,” I said again, holding the door open with one foot hanging out. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow in class.” I could tell she was eager to talk more, but I didn’t have time, Daddy would be home soon, and dinner needed to be ready even if my sister, Tea, wasn’t their to help. I closed the car door as she backed away. I wondered if she would she be able to find her way home.

In the summertime, we sit on our porches, eating watermelon sprinkled with salt, spittin’ the seeds to the ground and swatting flies. At night, we sit on patios and under neighbor’s carports, listening to the blues, drinking beer, burning citronella candles and laughing to re-

tellings of old jokes. Summer's over now though, still hot, but definitely in the turning season, and still I carrying around a guilty secret I was sure everyone knew. My sister and I were beginning to hang our heads low every time someone mentioned their family, wanting no questions asked about ours.

"How's your father?" they would say, and I'd nod, and if I was in a good mood, I'd say "okay," and roll my eyes as I turned to walk away.

Dinner had been prepared and finished, but we couldn't eat until Daddy made it home. It had become a rule after he started never coming home, but complained of how disrespectful it was to eat dinner without the person who paid for the groceries. My sister and I left the food in the oven, covered with foil and baking lids, and she'd yell "come on!" as we retreated on a quest to find him.

Before the accident, it was always easy to find Daddy. Usually my sister and I could hit the fruit and nut streets before the levee: Pecan, Walnut, Pear and Cherry, and find his truck parked off to the side somewhere like it was abandoned with the keys still in the ignition. From there, we'd search out the nearest house that looked empty. One with no porch light on or the blinds pulled tight, no cars parked near and no wicker wreath or signs of welcome on the door, that's where they were.

"Please, Tea," I begged.

"Nope," she said sharply. "I went in the last three times, you go." She unlocked the doors and pushed me toward it. My cheek slammed against the window and I massaged my jaw a moment before reluctantly opening the door. I could always talk my sister into going because she was older. I played that baby role and won her over because she was soft hearted, but even soft hearted people have a limit and today it was definitely my turn to go in and get Daddy.

"Pleaseeee," I asked once more, trying to muster tears to my eyes. Her hands gripped the steering wheel hard and she frowned with a stern face. Finally I stopped delaying, I had homework to do.

This time it was Mrs. Cunningham's house. Her oldest son, Al had converted her garage into a den since she didn't drive anymore, that's where they were. I could hear the faint sounds of laughter and loud chatter as I walked slowly to the side door. Al had his own house, only a couple of blocks away on Magnolia Street, newly built with a stain-glass insert in the front door. I never had to go to his house though, he mostly stayed here, with his mom who had just recently had a stroke and couldn't do too much of anything now.

As I neared the door, I heard music on the radio. I knew it was a radio by the scratchiness of the tune, probably an a.m. station, where some old man sat in a one room fort across the river flipping dusty blues records by Muddy Waters, Johnnie Taylor, and Bobby Blue Bland as he watched the sun go down. Poker, that's what else I was hearing, poker. The chips flipped across the table as the cards being shuffled blew whistles of wind. Laughs and chatter, empty beer cans being tossed onto the concrete floor bouncing back up with hollow tin sounds, snorts and sniffs, and "give a notha'." The door may as well been made of glass.

I stood and listened a bit longer. I turned to looked back at my sister's red car and saw her frustration as she nodded her head and pointed toward the door. I wasn't scared to go in; after all, I already knew what I would find. More than likely I'd have to stand in the doorway, tell Daddy supper's getting cold and he'd say "Yeah, yeah I'm coming" and take another card from the pile. I'd stand adamantly, while the other men at the table looked up and smirked.

"Ya daughter ready ain't she man?" they teased.

“Oh she don’t run me,” he’d say and raise him three.

Slowly, I put my hand to the knob, creakingly attempting to turn the handle when they began to get louder. “Ah damn, what... WHAT...!” someone yelled. Screaming began, chairs being knocked to the ground, their metal ends bouncing off the floor. Backwards steps slide and kicked up dust. Someone being pushed against the table knocks the radio over, it falls on its back and the music stops.

“Man fuck you!” one yells, and I let go of the door. Two were being held back, staggering footsteps toward each other, they yelled obscenities while the others spoke softly, “cool it man, cool it.”

“Man I ain’t got time for this shit, give me my god damn money!” That was Daddy’s voice. I stepped back from the door but before I could turn, out he came.

“What chu doin here?” He quickly looked down at me as he rustled his carpenters’ jacket on.

“Supper’s ready.” I put my hands behind my back and looked away. He smelled like cigarettes and sawdust, his shoes were covered in mud and I wondered where he had been before this. He walked passed me and towards the intersection, a half a block up where his truck was parked on the side of the ditch.

“Yeah, I’ll meet yahl at the house,” he yelled and threw his hand up behind his head in a wave of ‘see you later’. I returned to my sister’s car and we said nothing all the way home. Next time would be my turn too; I hadn’t fulfilled the quest yet.

I was late for school the next morning. My sister, in her second semester at the local community college, decided to leave the house later than usual and I had to either wait on her, or risk what response I would hear from Daddy if I dare woke him. Daddy wasn’t always like he was turning out to be. He was evolving, like summer’s changing, loosing the warmth it should have. I wasted time that morning, allowing my sister her thirty more minutes of sleep, while I made myself a breakfast that consisted of more than just dried toast with jelly.

When I got to school it was almost nine o’clock, and I had missed the first hour of Kate’s English class.

“We thought for sure, we’d miss you this morning,” she said merrily with a grin.

“Oh I’m full of surprises,” I said, sitting down without handing her a dean’s pass, and looked at all the handouts that had been left on my desk.

We were getting ready to finish up our final projects: individual persuasive essays of any piece of literature. The goal was to show how the text could be an analogy for another situation. Most of the kids in the class didn’t get it though, and Kate acted as if her encouragement to keep the project going instead of simplifying it was simply to see what I would produce. She sat down beside each desk that held a raised hand, re-explaining what the paper was to be about and brainstorming ideas, while the rest of the class chatted with each other and passed notes. She passed my desk as I sat there reading.

“I know you don’t need any help,” she smiled, tapping my desk top. Someone in the background muttered, “yeah smart ass over there don’t need shit...”.

“No, I’m good,” I said quickly lowering my head.

Kate drove me home again that evening after quiz bowl practice. We sat in silence for a while, listening to the soft hums of her radio.

“So have you given any thought to what your paper will be about?” I looked over and nodded. Kate had suggested that I use a historical reference rather than a literary text. “I think you’d be able to put a good spin on it,” she had said to me one day after class. I lifted my eyebrows in agreement, though I wasn’t really taking her seriously.

“Yeah, I’m weighing a few options,” I told her and she left it at that, smiling to herself. I honestly wished to tell her I wasn’t worried about her paper. I went about my day worrying about other things, like would Daddy be home when I got there and would it be because he had just not left yet.

Kate remembered the way to my house exactly, and it wasn’t until we pulled into our driveway that I remember who I was with. Daddy stood with his driver’s side door open, fumbling for something in his pockets.

“Oh, is that your father?” I sunk into my seat as I unlocked the seatbelt.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. He closed the truck door and began walking our way. What should I say, I wondered, knowing Kate was full of questions and Daddy was full of looks. I would have to answer all inquiries. He opened the door for me to get out, and gave Kate a quick nod.

“How are you?” she asked. “I’m Krystal’s English teacher, Kate Warne.” He nodded again, helping me out the car with a stern arm.

“Well, we thank you. Thanks so much,” he replied to her as he closed the door. We waved as Kate again backed away.

“You can head on into the house,” he said after a few moments. “I’ll be back later.”

Two weeks later, I had finally finished “Kate’s stupid paper”, as I kept referring, to my sister. I was sitting in her room as I printed out the final draft. It was thick, probably the longest paper I had ever written, over-excessively fifteen pages of facts and blah analysis of the text I used – The United States Constitution.

“Think you did enough,” my sister teased as she sat in front of the mirror, straightening her hair. “She would have never gotten that out of me,” she said.

“Yeah well this’ll teach her, Ms. Ivy League, now she has her fill of my “intelligence”. I thought briefly about taking a red marker and writing HAPPY with question mark at the end, but I decided not to, after all, I had done a lot of work and I still wanted an A.

I turned that paper in with pride and joy smiling ecstatically while my peers, pour out their excuses and promises to have it next week.

“Here you go,” I said, lying it flat on her desk.

“Well thank you very much. I’m excited to read it.” I stared at Kate while she sat beneath me, leaning her elbows on her desk. She wore a brown skirt and pea green sweater that looked hand-knitted. Her glasses were crooked and her earrings had a small jade jewel in them that swirled when she turned her head. I looked down at her desk and noticed she had put my paper off to the side, not in the pile with the rest of her students. I stared for a moment, realizing in that Kate expected something from me, something no one else expected or even thought twice about. All the other teachers at the school had seen the smart ones like me come and go; they weren’t impressed by those who could pass every test and keep a four point GPA, because no matter what they said or did, we would all end up the same. Still here, on the river, doing nothing with their lives, just soaking up the sun and sweating out the day, comfortable to just watch the river move while we stood still. But Kate expected success from me, she held a belief even Daddy didn’t see in me anymore: She thought I could be something, someone and go somewhere.

I placed my fingers on the stapled corner of my paper and attempted to pull it back; I didn't feel it was so good anymore. She placed her palm flat on the bottom, stopping me from pulling it any further.

"Ms. Warne, could you please send Krystal to the office immediately please," the loud speaker sounded out. Behind me the students "ooooood" and I quickly let go of the tip of my paper and walked out the door. I walked slowly to the office, only imagining what could have happened.

When the police told me that Daddy's truck had flipped over near the old rail tracks and that he was in the hospital having escaped miraculously with mild injuries, I started thinking about college. I wondered about the "Somewhere" place Kate was talking about and I wanted to go. I sat in the principal's office, looking at the recognitions posted on the wall behind his desk. I'm sure I glanced up or nodded at the principal and policemen. I'm sure I answered any questions they asked, about if he was a regular drunk or a sometimes druggie, but I only thought about two things: Mr. Whiteside was accomplished, what was my dad? And that for the first time since Mom died we would have to eat dinner without him.

It was only a week later, after Daddy had been released from the hospital that he was out again. My sister and I sat at the dinner table, the smell of fried chicken, turnip greens, corn on the cob, mashed potatoes, hot biscuits, and a pecan pie steaming under us.

"You know he's not coming home," I said to Tea. She continued to stare down at her plate, breathing heavily.

"No taxation without representation," I said.

"What?" she finally looked up.

"Tea, you can't make rules if you're not here to enforce them." She lowered her head again and ran her fingernails against each other, a habit she'd acquired from years of playing the piano, running her fingers against the edges of the keys. She picked up the bowl of greens and after slapping a huge spoonful onto her plate she handed the bowl to me.

"Let's eat," she said.

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