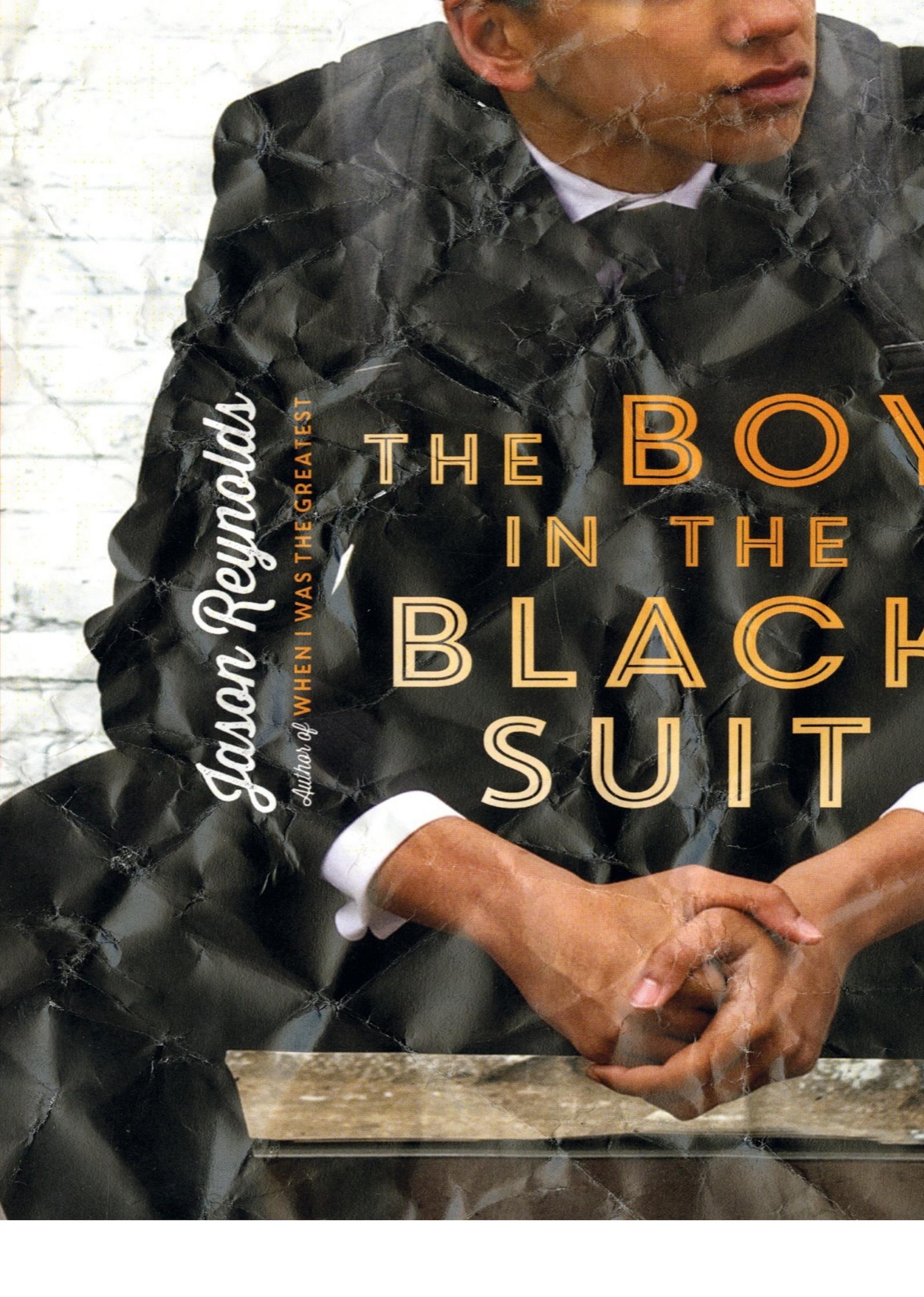


*Jason Reynolds*

Author of *WHEN I WAS THE GREATEST*

THE BOY  
IN THE  
BLACK  
SUITS



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**FOR AUNT BUD AND UNCLE CALVIN**

**AND FOR WALTER DEAN MYERS.  
THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU**

**T H E  
B O Y  
I N T H E  
B L A C K  
S U I T**

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**J A S O N  
R E Y N O L D S**

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*Hey there, you, looking for a brighter season,  
need to lay your burden down.*

*Hey there, you, drowning in a helpless feeling,  
buried under deeper ground.*

—LAURA MVULA, “SING TO THE MOON”

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# CHAPTER 1

## EVERYTHING IS BACKWARD

*IT WAS THE FIRST DAY of school. Actually, it was the nineteenth day of school, but it was my first day, and all I could think about was how happy I was that I had already missed three weeks, and that this would be the last first day in this place I would ever have. Thank God. Don't get me wrong, I didn't hate school. I just wasn't really in the mood to be lugging books around, or learning stuff that didn't really matter to me, or even worse, being around people that I didn't really matter to. I know, I know—I sound like a prime candidate for black fingernails and emo poetry, but I guess what I'm really trying to say is that I just wasn't feeling too social. Scratch that—I wasn't feeling social at all. Lockers slamming, sneakers screeching and squeaking on the floor as even one kind of teenager ran through the hallways laughing and shouting on their way to class—it was all like one black nail on an even bigger chalkboard. Everyone was zipping by, bumping me, as I sort of floated through the hallway like some kind of zombie.*

*It was like I was living in a different world where everything was backward. Ms. Harris, the principal who normally spent most of her time hiding from students in her office, offered to actually walk me to my locker. Meanwhile, kids I was cool with—at least I thought I was cool with—like James Skinner, totally ignored me. So what I mean? Backward.*

*The last time I saw James was during the summer when our whole class had to meet up at the school to have our senior pictures taken. Me and James joked about how much we hated taking photos, and how our crazy moms were obsessed about the whole thing. I told him how my mother begged me to smile, but I knew I wouldn't. I couldn't. Not because I didn't want to, it's just that every time a camera was pointed at me, I never knew what to do with my face. Some people can smile on cue. You say "smile," and they go ear to ear, flashing every tooth in their mouth. And some people . . . can't. I was one of those. So, I knew in my senior pictures I would look just like I did in my junior, sophomore, and freshman pictures—like a robot. Except this time, it would be a robot face wearing a cap and gown, which is even worse.*

*The point is, I had just seen my so-called friend James—had just joked about this corny senior picture craze with him—and now he was acting like he didn't even know me. I guess that's what happens when people find out your mom just died. You become invisible. At least I did. To everybody. Well, almost everybody.*

*"Yo, Matt, I'm so sorry about your moms, man." Chris Hayes, my best friend, slid up behind me while I tried to stuff myself into my locker. He was one of those guys who was supercool, crazy fly, and girls had a thing for him.*

shaved head. He'd probably be voted "Best Dressed" or something dumb like that, and if he wanted to, he'd have a fair shot at prom king. And to top it all off, he was trying hard to be sympathetic to me, his pretty normal, not really sad homeboy. I appreciated it even though it did no good. But at least he had enough heart to come up to me and say something, instead of just avoiding me, like death was some kind of disease that anyone could catch just by speaking to me. Everybody else was either staring at me or trying way too hard to not look at me at all.

"Y'know . . . Mrs. Miller was like a second mom to me, and I'm so, so sorry I couldn't make the funeral." Chris went on.

Well, I'm sorry you couldn't make it either. I'm sorry I had to sit there in that church—which, by the way, had a broken air conditioner—sweating, watching all those people march down the aisle to look in my mother's casket and whisper to themselves all this mess about how much she looked like herself, even though she didn't. I'm sorry you weren't there to hear the lame choir drag out, song after song. I'm sorry you weren't there to see my dad try his best to be upbeat, cracking bad jokes in his speech, choking on his words. I'm sorry you weren't there to watch me totally lose it and explode into tears. I'm sorry you weren't there for me, but it doesn't matter, because even if you were, you wouldn't be able to feel what I feel. Nobody can. Even the preacher said so.

That's what I wanted to say, but I didn't because Chris didn't deserve all that. I knew he would've been there if he could've. But he just couldn't do it. I get that. So I turned around to look at him and said, "It's all good, man." I swallowed hard and reached out for a five, holding back my tears. Do. not. cry. Not in school.

Chris grabbed my hand and pulled me close for a man-hug. And right at that moment, with perfect high school timing, Shawn Bowman ran up behind Chris, slapped him on the ass, and rambled off some dumb joke calling us gay or whatever. And of course, after Shawn said that, the girl he was with—Michelle something—smacked him on the arm and sucked her teeth. She yanked Shawn close and whispered in his ear, and I could tell she told him my mom had just died because his face went from blue-black to—well, it stayed blue-black, but if he could've turned red he would've been a walking stop sign. Chris had turned around and glared at Shawn. He had his fists balled up and I could tell he was pissed.

"Asshole," Chris growled. Shawn just slinked away, embarrassed, which, judging by Chris's tone, was a good idea.

It was like all of sudden high school became . . . high school. A bunch of immature, irresponsible teens who felt invincible only because they'd never really been through nothing. The ones who had didn't act like everybody else. Like Shante Jansen. When she got pregnant our sophomore year, she changed big-time. That baby grew her up, and certain things about high school suddenly seemed a lot less important. She just wanted to do her work and go home. No time for the extra silliness. That's how I felt. Like all of a sudden I was way too old for high school, even though I really wasn't. Such a strange feeling.

Luckily, I didn't have to be in school too long. Because I had done pretty good my freshman, sophomore, and junior years, I had a short schedule and could leave at noon everyday. Of course, I was a little behind, but Mr. Harris had all the teachers create make-up assignments for me so that I could catch up on the work I missed. I wasn't really worried too much though. School was always pretty easy for me. A lot easier than smiling, that's for

sure.

The original plan was to go to school from eight forty-five to noon, then work at the bank from one to five thirty, as a part of the work-study program. I wasn't too gassed about working at a bank, just because it seemed like it would be boring as hell, sitting behind that thick glass counting other people's money all day. The paycheck, however, I was definitely excited about. But because I missed the first few weeks of school, I also missed the first few weeks of work, and the bank filled my spot with another student. So I was left without a job and nothing to do after class.

My father and I talked when I got word that my spot was being given away, and he told me not to worry about it, but that I should definitely try to find some work, especially since I was going to have so much time on my hands. When he said that, my mother hadn't passed yet. Now that she had, I really wanted to find a job, not just to keep busy, but also to try to help him out with the bills. And even though I considered myself to be pretty smart, I didn't have any work experience, at least not any that was on the books. Sweeping Ms. Jones's steps didn't really count.

So I did what anybody in my position would do. I tried to get a job at a fast-food joint. Cluck Bucket. The grimmest spot in the hood. But they were known for paying pretty good. At least more than most of the other fast-food spots. Everybody said it was because it was owned by some rich dude who felt like the least he could do was pay folks enough to survive, since he was practically killing the whole hood with the food. How could something that tastes so good be so bad for you?

I had eaten there tons of times. My mother would send me out to get chicken baskets on Friday nights. We cooked Monday through Thursday and then took the weekend off. Yes, we cooked. I was pretty much my mom's sous chef growing up, which is just a fancy way of saying I was her kitchen assistant. A little slicing, a little dicing. Some stirring, some sprinkling. What I'm getting at is, I'm kind of mean with the pot and pan. That's another reason why Cluck Bucket seemed like an easy choice for me. I can burn, and I like the food. Especially the biscuits. My mom always said they reminded her of real country biscuits. I never had a country biscuit, but Cluck Bucket's were incredible. As a matter of fact, Cluck Bucket's everything was pretty good, all the way down to the sweet tea.

"Can I help whoever's next in line?" the girl behind the register said with about as much enthusiasm as I had for anything right now—none. She wore a net on her head that made her hair look more like some kind of helmet, and a gold necklace was around her neck with a nameplate hanging from it. RENEE, it said in cursive.

I stepped forward, my sneakers making that weird sound you hear when something comes unstuck.

"Welcome to Cluck Bucket, would you like to try a combo, a special, the Cluck Deluxe, a shake, or a delicious treat from our list of desserts?" she rattled off while rolling her eyes and looking away.

"Are y'all hiring?" I asked, sort of quietly. I didn't care if anybody knew I was trying to get a job, but at the same time, I didn't want everybody in my business.

Renee looked at me for a second, sizing me up.

"Hold on," she said, annoyed. She turned around and yelled to the back, but it looked like she was yelling at the chicken stacked up in that big metal bed thing it sits in. "Clara. We hiring?"

*Another woman appeared from behind the metal trays. Her shirt was white instead of purple like Renee's. She also had that hair thing around her head, but her hair was in braids and looked like snakes caught in a net.*

*"You looking for a job?" Clara said roughly.*

*"Yes."*

*She reached under the register and pulled out a piece of paper. An application.*

*"Fill this out over there." She pointed toward the tables closer to the door. "And bring it back up here when you done."*

*Clara then slapped a pen down on the counter and glared at me. "And don't steal my pen."*

*I sat down and started filling out the application, trying to block out the stale smell of old grease and the sounds of all the people coming in and out, yelling and cracking jokes, kids skipping school, construction workers on their lunch breaks, junkies begging for biscuits, and just about anybody else you could possibly imagine. The bell on the door kept jingling every time someone opened it, letting in the car horns and police sirens from outside. Noise from every damn where.*

*"What's good, Ma?" a young guy probably my age said to Renee. "You looking good with that thing on your head," he joked. His boys laughed.*

*I tried to see her reaction, but I couldn't because he was standing in front of her. But I could hear her.*

*"Yeah, whatever. What you want, man?"*

*The guy rocked left to right and adjusted the hat on his head, and his crotch.*

*"What's good with your number?" he said, slick.*

*"Nope. But how about some food," Renee said pretty flat. I'm sure she got this kind of crap all the time. Some fool crackin' slick in front of his friends. I always wondered if this kind of game worked. Like, does "What's good with your number" really bag the ladies? Doubt it.*

*"A'ight, a'ight, a'ight, whatever. Just let me get a Deluxe."*

*"No Deluxes. All out."*

*"Damn, a'ight. Well, let me get Five Cluck Strips."*

*"No strips."*

*"Come on, really?"*

*"Really."*

*"A'ight well, just give me a three-piece meal. I know you got chicken." The guy laughed and shook his head disappointed.*

*At this point he moved to the side, just enough for me to see Renee. She turned around and looked at all the chicken in the hot bed. There must've been like sixty pieces in there. Then she turned back around to the dude.*

*"All out."*

*"What?"*

*"All out. No more chicken."*

*"It's chicken right there! What you talkin' about?"*

*“All out.”*

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*The boy stood there stunned.*

*Renee smirked and lifted her hands to her face, her fingers forming a pretend camera. She acted like she was taking a picture. “Snapshot!” she shouted. Then Renee looked at the make-believe camera as if she was checking the photo—guess it was an invisible digital—and teased, “Yikes, not your best face.”*

*The dude’s boys started laughing at him, and before he could say anything back, Renee said, “Next in line please!”*

*Then he got all sensitive and cussed Renee up and down, throwing the typical “You ain’t even that prett anyway!” at her, bumping tables and chairs as he walked out. His boys trailed behind him like a litter of puppies. I looked down at my application as they were leaving. Guys like that always try to mess with somebody else make them feel better, and I just wasn’t in the mood.*

*Everyone else in line laughed, though. Especially when the next guy ordered fifty pieces of chicken and got even piece. Apparently, that’s why she really couldn’t sell that jerk the chicken. It was already spoken for.*

*“Thank you so much, love. I already have it squared with Clara,” the man who ordered all the chicken said.*

*“No prob, Mr. Ray.”*

*Mr. Ray? I looked up, and sure enough, it was Mr. Willie Ray standing there while Renee piled fried chicken into cardboard buckets.*

*Mr. Ray was a tall stick of a man who everyone in the neighborhood knew for two reasons. The first is, he was in the funeral business. A mortician. He owned Ray’s Funeral Home after inheriting it from his father. It’s weird to say, but most of the teenagers and old folks who’ve died around here have passed through Willie Ray’s door.*

*The other thing everyone knows him for is, well, cancer. Mr. Ray beat it twice, and the only reason everybody knows that is because after he beat it the second time, he basically became, like, a Jehovah’s Witness for cancer knocking on doors and passing out pamphlets. He swears the only reason God spared his life twice is so that he could spread the word about the illness, as if nobody knew what it was. My mother used to always joke with him and say, “Willie, God saved you just so you could torture the hell outta the rest of us? That don’t make no sense.” He never got upset with her. He just used to laugh and shake his head while heading on to the next house.*

*“Mr. Ray?” I called out.*

*“Matthew, I didn’t see you sitting there. How are you?” he said, walking toward me with his familiar limp.*

*“I’m okay.” I stood and shook his hand. “What’s with all the chicken?”*

*“Man, it’s a funeral. Well, really it’s a repast. They didn’t have anyone to cater it, so they paid the funeral home extra for us to take care of the accommodations. So we always just come down here and get the chicken. It’s easy and everybody likes it,” he explained. “What you up to?”*

*“Just trying to get a job.” I pointed to the application that I had literally only filled out my name on, so far.*

*“Where, here?”*

*“Yes sir.”*

*Mr. Ray stood there for a second and gave me a once-over, as if he was upset that I was trying to work*

*Cluck Bucket. As far as I was concerned, it was an honest gig. I figured it was probably tough at times, but still honest. Plus, I figured I could maybe learn what the secret to some of that fried deliciousness was so that I could take it back to my own kitchen. Maybe make those biscuits for me and my dad one day.*

*“Matthew, if you work here, you’ll never be able to eat here again,” he finally joked.*

*I didn’t really think that was true. I mean, certain things you just never get tired of. Cluck Bucket, for me, was definitely one. That’s like saying that if I would’ve gotten that job working at the bank, I would’ve eventually gotten sick of money. Yeah, right. Not that Mr. Ray was wrong. I just couldn’t see it. But I didn’t say anything. Just shrugged.*

*“Listen. Your mother was a friend of mine. And your father still is. If you need a job, I’ll pay you a couple bucks to help me out down at the funeral home. I mean, I heard they pay pretty good in this crap shack, but I’m sure I can get close, and you won’t have to come home smelling like deep-fried fat every night, or put up with the knuckleheads. What you think?” Mr. Ray inched his jacket sleeve up just enough to see his watch, which he twisted around so that the gold face was on the top of his wrist. “Unless,” he said low, his eyes still on the time, “you got anything for hairnets.”*

*Funny. Real funny.*

*I thought for a moment. Mr. Ray was definitely a friend of my folks. He was the one who talked to my mother about the chemotherapy, and what that would be like. He said he didn’t know much about breast cancer, but he did know that ice cream is the secret to feeling better when the treatment makes you feel sick. As a matter of fact, Mr. Ray was there the day my mom was taken to the hospital, the day she left home for good. He helped my father get her down the steps because she refused to let the EMT guys put her on a stretcher.*

*“I ain’t no princess and I ain’t no baby, so I don’t need to be carried nowhere,” she had snapped as Dad and Mr. Ray held her up by her arms and eased her down the stoop, one painful step at a time.*

*Dad cracked a joke about her being a queen. “Damn right!” she replied, and Mr. Ray was right there to cosign.*

*“The queen of your house, this block, Bed-Stuy—hell, Daisy, you the queen of all of Brooklyn!” Mr. Ray joked. “And guess what? Your throne will be right here waiting for you when you come home.”*

*She never came home, but we appreciated Mr. Ray’s positivity. He was always that way—a good guy. And even though I trusted him, did I really want to work at the funeral home with him? I mean, it wasn’t him I was worried about. It was just the whole death thing, and the fact that I would have to be around sad people all the time. Losing my mom was already damn near too much for me to deal with, so being around a bunch of strangers dealing with the same crap just seemed like hell.*

*But the way Mr. Ray was talking, hell paid pretty good. And even though I didn’t buy the whole “You won’t be able to eat here” crap, I didn’t want to risk it. But still, I didn’t know if I could really do it. A funeral home?*

*“Thanks Mr. Ray,” I said, tapping the ink pen on the application. “But I don’t think I can do that. It’s just . . . I just . . .” I struggled to explain why, but I could tell by the way he looked at me that I didn’t really have a chance.*

*“No need to explain, son,” he said, putting his hand up. “Trust me, I get it.”*

*I looked down at the application, embarrassed. Even though Mr. Ray said he understood where I was coming from, I still felt a little stupid turning down his offer when the only other option was to work in a grimy chicken spot. But on the other hand, it just didn't seem like a good idea to take a job somewhere where I'd have to relive my mom's funeral everyday. Like being paid to replay the worst day of my life over and over again.*

*Mr. Ray put his hand on my shoulder. “Just let me know if you change your mind.” I didn't look up. I just nodded and started filling out the address line, signing myself up for fry-duty. But it was either that or die-dum. Lose-lose.*

*As soon as Mr. Ray turned around to walk back toward the counter, the door swung open and a young girl came rushing in, her hand pressed tight to her mouth, her cheeks bulging from her face. And before she could get to the bathroom—hell, before she could even get all the way inside—she spewed red, lumpy slime all over the already sticky floor. It looked like that old-lady pudding. What's it called? Tapioca? Yeah. It was like tapioca. But really. And if there's one thing I just can't deal with, it's puke. Two things, really—tapioca and puke. I just can't. Everything about throw-up is gross. The way it looks, the way it smells, the way it sounds. All of it. Straight-up nasty. So when this girl came in chucking her lunch, I sprung from my chair and damn near jumped on Mr. Ray. I literally almost knocked him over.*

*“What the—” Mr. Ray whipped around after hearing the belching and hacking sound of spit-up, along with my chair sliding back from under the table and my footsteps running up on him. “Clara!” he shouted. “Clara! You got a situation out here!”*

*I stood next to Mr. Ray, but faced the opposite way. I looked straight ahead at Renee and the other customers who were also grossed out, while Mr. Ray focused on the sick kid, who I could hear heaving.*

*Renee stretched her neck to see what was happening, and once she saw the mess, she just tightened her lips and shook her head. Like this was normal. “Clara, we need a clean-up,” she said in a bored voice.*

*“Clara!” Mr. Ray barked again.*

*“I'm coming, I'm coming!” Clara yelled. She came through a door on the side of the kitchen, rolling a yellow mop bucket. A guy followed behind her with what looked like a bag of sand and one of those big orange cones.*

*“Jesus,” Clara said, passing me. I locked my eyes on the chicken. I couldn't stand to see the puke, because if they had seen it, they'd have had to clean up two tapiocas. “Put that stuff down and go get her some water,” Clara said to the guy with the sand.*

*The dude ran back toward the kitchen and in a flash came back with a cup of water.*

*“Sit down,” Clara said to the girl.*

*“I'm sorry. I'm so sorry,” the girl cried over and over again, and I could tell she was lifting the cup to her mouth because her voice changed. “I'm so sorry. I just . . . couldn't make it to the bathroom.” She sounded embarrassed, and to be honest, I was pretty embarrassed too. I mean, I was already feeling a way when I turned down the job Mr. Ray offered me, but now I was visibly scared of upchuck and I just knew the girl at the register was looking at me act like a pussy. So, yeah—pretty embarrassed.*

*“Next in line!” Renee called. Turns out she wasn’t paying me no mind. She wasn’t tripping about anything. For her this was just another day at the job. I didn’t know how anyone could still have an appetite, especially since the whole place smelled like old, wet socks now, but people went on ordering.*

*Mr. Ray faced the front of the restaurant and put his arm around me. “All good, Matthew,” he said. “Go ahead and finish up your application. Hell, they should hire you just for having to endure that!” He chuckled at himself and moved toward the register.*

*“Wait. Mr. Ray.” I reached out and grabbed his arm. He turned back toward me. “Will I . . . uh . . . will I have to touch dead people?” Honest question.*

*He crossed his arms. “Do you want to?”*

*“No.”*

*“Then, no.”*

*I weighed my options. Funerals suck. The possibility of not being able to eat my favorite fast food, dealing with random crazies who come in and talk trash, and mopping up throw-up really, really sucks.*

*“Okay,” I said to Mr. Ray.*

*“Okay?”*

*“Okay.”*

*Mr. Ray smiled. “Okay,” he said with a nod. “C’mon, you can start right now.”*

*I followed him up to the register. I set Clara’s pen on the counter while Mr. Ray reached in his suit jacket and pulled out a few cancer pamphlets and left them in front of Renee’s register, like they were some kind of tip or something.*

*“Give these to your grandma,” he said while we gathered up all the buckets of chicken.*

*“You got it,” Renee said nicely as we headed toward the door. I held my breath as me and Mr. Ray tiptoed over the pile of sand that covered whatever was left of the vomit, leaving the application with only my name and home address of my address on the table.*

*x x x*

*“So, who’s funeral is it up there?” I asked Mr. Ray as we laid the chicken out on platters. The repast (I actually didn’t know that’s what they’re called, but it’s the dinner after the funeral—the repast) was happening in the basement of the funeral home, and the actual service was going on upstairs. The only reason I knew that some funerals happen in the funeral home is because we used to always see people standing outside of Ray’s dressed in all black, hugging, just like they do at funerals that happen at churches. The good thing about Ray’s Funeral Home is, at least the AC worked.*

*“You know Rhonda Jameson?” Mr. Ray asked.*

*He placed a breast next to a leg.*

*“Ms. Jameson died?”*

*“No. Ms. Jameson is fine. Her father passed last week.”*

*“Oh,” I said. “Well, at least she had him for a long time.”*

*“Yeah.” Still, he shook his head. “But it never gets any easier.”*

*Mr. Ray put these big, really nice bowls on the table and was scooping out spoonfuls of canned greens. I have to admit, the food area looked pretty good. He had tablecloths down and fake flowers on the tables (I hate real flowers, but I’ll get to that), and had me set up the cushioned fold-up chairs instead of the regular, hard-butt ones.*

*After all the food was out and all the tables were set, there really wasn’t much else to do, but I still didn’t want to go home yet. At the same time I also hoped Mr. Ray didn’t start digging into how I was feeling and all that. I mean, I know people mean well when they ask those kinds of questions, but at the end of the day, they are stupid questions. How am I feeling? Well, let me think. My mother’s funeral was a couple days ago, so I damn sure ain’t happy.*

*Lucky for me, Mr. Ray didn’t ask anything like that. He actually didn’t say nothing about my mother at all. Instead he started talking about what he was like when he was my age.*

*“Man,” Mr. Ray said with a sigh, “you better than I was. You responsible, y’know?” He leaned against the wall and crossed his ankles.*

*“I guess,” I said, unsure of where this conversation was going.*

*“I mean, I wasn’t thinking about no job or nothing like that. I was thinking about one thing only—skirts.”*

*“You were thinking about wearing skirts?” I asked, shocked.*

*“No, man! I didn’t mean”—his raspy voice sounded even more scratchy when he got excited—“I mean girls, man. Skirts. We were thinking about girls. Like your buddy, Chris.”*

*Mr. Ray seemed disappointed that I didn’t pick up on his old-school slang.*

*“Oh.” I smirked. Chris definitely thought about girls. “Well, I think about them too. A lot. I just also think about other stuff, I guess.” I didn’t really see the big deal in that. Girls are great. But so is graduating from high school and leaving it behind. Forever. Seemed pretty basic to me.*

*“And that’s why you’re different. Man, me and my brother Robbie done wrecked many a car, taking our eyes off the road to check out some lady’s hind-parts.”*

*Hind-parts? I snickered and Mr. Ray started laughing too. He probably thought I was laughing at him and his brother, but what it really was, was the word hind-parts. Such an old-people word.*

*The whole time we talked I could hear the people upstairs moving around. I couldn’t make out voices, but every footstep came through. I wondered what the people at Mr. Jameson’s funeral were doing. If they were laughing or crying, or both. If someone was whispering stupid comments to the person next to them about how good Mr. Jameson looked dead. If Ms. Jameson was exploding. Like I did.*

*“Mr. Ray, can I ask you something?”*

*“Of course.” I could tell he thought I was going to ask him something about girls by the way he crossed his legs the other way.*

*But I didn’t.*

*“Can I go up there?”*

*“Where?” he asked, confused.*

*I pointed up. “Up there? To the funeral. Just for a second.”*

*“Why?” He cocked his head slightly to the side.*

*I just shrugged. I couldn't tell him why because I'm not sure I really knew why at the time. I just all of sudden wanted to. I needed to.*

*Mr. Ray looked at me for a few seconds, hard. Then he sucked his teeth. “Come here, Matthew,” he said, taking off his suit jacket. “If you gonna go up there, be respectful.” He held the coat open so I could slip my arms in. “And sit in the back.”*

## *THE FUNERAL OF CLARK “SPEED-O” JAMESON*

*Upstairs, the funeral home was pretty much the same as downstairs, except much darker and no tables. Just rows of padded fold-ups and a wooden podium in the front. The lights were dimmed, which was very different from the bright lights in the church at my mother's funeral. The darkness definitely made it seem more serious. Plus it helped you better in case you exploded.*

*Robbie Ray, Mr. Ray's younger brother, was the MC for the funeral, kind of like how the preacher is when you have one at a church. But Robbie Ray wasn't no preacher. As a matter of fact, he was pretty much still the same man who was crashing cars looking at “hind-parts” when he was younger, except now he was older. But he still looked young. Way younger than Mr. Ray. And he was always dressed like he was looking for a date. Tight suits with his shirt always unbuttoned down to the middle of his chest like we live on some island or something. He always wore gold watches, gold chains, had a gold slug in the front of his mouth, and wore a gold nugget ring on his pinky. My mother used to always clown him, saying he was stuck somewhere between 1970 and outer space.*

*“And now we're going to have a few words from some of Mr. Jameson's friends,” Robbie said, his voice deep like a late-night radio show host's. Sometimes I thought he was making it that way on purpose, just to go with his whole style. But I could never tell for sure.*

*He moved his finger over the program to make sure he called the right name. “Mr. McCray?”*

*I slipped into a seat in the back like Mr. Ray told me. I felt a little silly, not because I was at a random funeral, but because my arms looked like tentacles in Mr. Ray's huge suit jacket. It fit me okay in the shoulders because Mr. Ray was skinny, but the sleeves were way too long. I kept pulling them up to my wrist, and tried to keep my fingers spread out so they wouldn't slide back down.*

*Next to me was an old lady dressed in a purple skirt and a black and purple polka-dot shirt. Who said you had to wear all black to a funeral, I thought as I looked down at my blue jeans and green and brown Nikes. I glanced over at her and nodded. She gave me an awkward look. At first I thought maybe she knew I didn't belong there. But then she kept wiggling her nose like she was going to sneeze, so I figured it was all the cologne coming from Mr. Ray's suit coat. I don't know what it is about old men and cologne. My mother used to say that when men get old they think anything that smells bad can kill germs better than soap and hot water, so they either bathe in liquor or cologne. I wanted to lean over to that old lady and tell her that I was sorry for the stench and that*

hoped it didn't cause her more grief than she was already feeling. But I didn't. I just made whatever face I thought looked like it was saying I was sorry, and nodded my head to her.

"Afternoon, afternoon," a mumble came over the speakers. "I'm A. J. McCrary. Not McCray. McCrary." The old, bent-over man peered at Robbie Ray for messing up his name.

"Anyway, y'all know how Clark got the name Speed-O?" A. J. McCrary leaned on the podium and spoke into the mic. His face looked like leather, and his eyes were big and glassy. He only had white hair on the sides of his head, almost like he was wearing ear muffs made of pure cotton.

"Y'all wanna know?" he asked again, his voice pitchy and weird like all the teeth in his mouth were loose.

Some people in the crowd grunted, a few others shouted, "Tell it!"

"Oh, I'm a tell it," he said, adjusting the microphone.

"One time, a long time ago when we was kids, there used to be this old doughnut shop over on DeKalb all the cops used to hang at. So we outside of there, and Clark starts talking to me about the pig this and the pig that and that he been reading black newspapers and checkin' what Malcolm X been saying up in Harlem. This was the sixties, so you know how it was. 'Fros, people changing their names and all that."

The older people in the crowd nodded their heads in agreement. I glanced over at the lady next to me and imagined her with an afro. Yikes.

"So Clark kicking all this revolution stuff, and I told him, 'Man you ain't 'bout nothin'. You just yappin' your trap. But you ain't gonna do a"—the old man caught himself about to cuss—"a daggone thing."

People started giggling.

"He said, 'Oh, yeah? Watch this.' Next thing I know this fool come running out the doughnut shop with one doughnut in his hand and one in his mouth, and a young white cop running behind him hollerin' 'bout his doughnut gettin' stolen. Can you imagine that? A cop yellin' out, 'Thief, thief!'"

Everybody started laughing at this crazy story. Even me.

"I didn't see him for a few days after that," Mr. McCrary continued, "but when I did, he told me he never got caught! And to prove it, he told me he had the other doughnut in his house for me. He said Brother Malcolm talked about whatever you do for yo'self, you do for your brother. So the other doughnut was mine. I couldn't believe it—one, because that's crazy; two, because he risked his life over some doughnuts; and three, because he actually outran the police! You know how fast you gotta be to get away from the cops . . . on foot? Pretty damn"—he caught himself again—"daggone fast! So I started calling him Speed-O, and it stuck."

He laughed and began coughing harshly into the mic, digging into his back pocket for a handkerchief to spit in. Robbie Ray reached out for him to help him to his seat, though Mr. McCrary didn't look like he was quite ready to sit down. But realizing that his time was up, he looked back into the crowd and pressed his lips to the mic as if he was kissing it.

"We'll miss him, and many blessings to his family. Thank you," he added quickly, his voice now way too loud, popping through the speakers.

Everybody shook their heads, confirming that Mr. Jameson was that kind of guy.

Robbie Ray came bopping back up to the mic to introduce the next speaker. I kept feeling something sticking me in my chest, so I reached my hand into the jacket to see what kept poking me. Of course, not thinking, I pulled out what had to be at least ten cancer pamphlets. For a moment I forgot whose jacket I had on. The lady next to me shot her eyes over at me. I just made the weird robot face I make when I'm taking pictures—big eyes, tight lips—and tried to stuff the pamphlets back in the pocket as quickly as possible. Especially since I didn't know who Mr. Jameson died of. Might've been cancer. That would've been awkward.

"Mr. Wallace," Robbie said next in his weird, fake sexy voice.

A giant rose from the second row. Seriously, the biggest man I've ever seen in real life. His head was the size of a basketball, and his back was like a king-size mattress. Except made of bricks.

"Good afternoon," the giant said.

I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This humongous monster of a man had the voice of a six-year-old. High, squeaky. Like, cute. I could hear that weird sound when you try to hold in a laugh but a little bit leaks out—like a mouth fart—happening all over the church. People were trying not to crack up, but his voice made it so hard.

"Um, my name is Mouse," he said, leaning down to get to the microphone. His hands, the size of oven mittens, were gripping the sides of the wooden podium. He could've ripped it apart like nothing if he wanted to.

"And Speed-O trained me when I first got the job with the trucking company. We worked together for a long time. Had a lot of fun. A lot of laughs." Mouse smiled, flashing a big gap in his two front teeth, as if he was suddenly reminiscing in his mind about some of those moments.

"Anybody who knew Speed-O knows he loved to tell stories, and the crazy thing was, you never knew if the stories were true or not. You knew he wasn't no liar, at least he ain't seem like one. But some of the stories were just so ridiculous." Mouse laughed a silly laugh. It sounded like a never-ending hiccup.

"Like this one time, we riding through Arizona on a five-day delivery. I think it was August—the heat was kicking something terrible. Brooklyn summer ain't got nothing on Arizona." He pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead. "So we pull up to this gas station, some random spot off the map. And Speed-O get to talking about how the last time he had been down in Arizona he stopped at that exact same gas station, and that it was so hot last time that he seen a horse leaning up against the ice chest—you know those old ice chests that sit outside of some stores. One of them. He said the horse was leaning with all four of his legs crossed at the ankle and was panting like a dog. All four legs! Then he said that somebody slipped a cigarette in the horse's mouth to smoke because the damn horse looked so stressed out by the heat."

The room broke out in laughter.

"Shoot, so I asked him," Mouse continued. "I said, 'Speed-O, you sure the heat just wasn't getting to you, and you was seeing things?' You know what he said? He said, 'Nope. I know it was real, because I was the one who slipped the horse's cigarette!'"

The room erupted again. People squealed, rocking back and forth, wiping tears from their eyes. I mean, not only was the story hilarious, but the fact that the huge guy telling it sounded like a little kid made it even better.

looked over at the old lady next to me and she was chuckling. She glanced at me and saw that I was laughing to and nodded. Everyone was nudging each other and I could tell that some of the other folks in the room had heard that story before. And in a weird way, I kind of felt like I knew Mr. Jameson, at least for that moment.

“He was so serious. He never ever said he was kidding or even cracked a smile. He just told the story while lighting a smoke and unwrapping a honey bun, which was his favorite road snack. He was a good friend. I’m gonna miss him a lot, but I’m glad I got to know him.”

Mouse maneuvered his way back to his seat, bumping just about everything and everyone. While most people were still laughing, Ms. Jameson stepped up to the mic.

“My name is Rhonda Jameson.” She stood there a moment and waited for the crowd to quiet down. “Clark, Speed-O as most of you knew him, was—is my father.”

Ms. Jameson looked tired, but was still upbeat. It definitely seemed to be a pretty cool funeral from what I could tell. Nothing like my mom’s.

“I just want to say thank you to everyone for coming out. My father would be so thrilled to know that you came to say your final good-byes.” And just like that, her eyes started to swell and fill with tears.

“I’m not gonna cry,” she whispered to herself, taking deep breaths. “He would’ve wanted you to know that he did everything his way. He was honest, his way.” Everyone laughed lowly as Ms. Jameson shot a wink to Mouse who flashed his gappy grin. “He was loyal, his way.” Now she nodded to Mr. McCrary.

“But most importantly, he loved, his way,” she said, her face starting to melt as the water rose up in her eyes. “He loved . . .,” she started, but couldn’t get it out. The breakdown was coming, and there was no stopping it.

I sat in my seat, suddenly anxious. My stomach started to feel weird, and strangely I felt a little desperate to see what was going to happen next. Would she cry? Would she run out? Would she pass out? It wasn’t like I was going to be happy to see Ms. Jameson, a lady I had known most of my life from the neighborhood, sad. But I wanted to see if I could tell if she was feeling what I had been feeling.

“He loved . . .” Her voice fluttered. “I’m sorry. I just . . . I just . . .” She turned away from the mic and looked to her left as if she was looking for someone to help her, but no one was there. She started shaking and biting her bottom lip hard enough to draw blood. A few people in the crowd shouted, “It’s okay!” But it really wasn’t. I knew that and she knew that, more than anyone else in the room. Robbie Ray came over to help her, and he held her close while she stumbled and wept through the rest of her speech. After that—and this may sound weird—I felt satisfied.

x x x

I didn’t stay for the repast, which would pretty much become tradition. Funerals only. Nothing else. I gave Mr. Ray back his funky coat, and told him that I needed to head home.

“Homework?” he asked, like an old man.

“Yeah, unfortunately,” I lied. I didn’t have any homework. I just didn’t want to be around when people started introducing themselves and talking about how they knew Mr. Jameson. It would’ve been pretty awkward.

*if his loved ones found out that I actually never met the guy. That we never shared a joke or advice or nothing like that. That I was just kind of hanging out watching the funeral like it was a pickup game at the park, or some kind of reality TV show. Crashing Caskets.*

*“Yeah, you a different one, a’ight. Nothing like how me and Robbie was,” Mr. Ray said again, slipping his arm back into his suit jacket. “You go ’head on. We’ll meet back here tomorrow after school is through.”*

*I nodded. “I’ll be here.”*

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# CHAPTER 2

## HEAD TO FOOT

*IT'S SO WEIRD HOW A PERSON can be a normal part of your everyday life, and then just disappear. And when they do, you realize that some of those everyday things go with them. Like the smell of food cooking. Or the sound of Rick James, Frankie Beverly, or the Isley Brothers playing as background music in our house. The kettle whistling. Water running in the kitchen sink. She was always at the kitchen sink, my mom, doing a two-step or something. Her voice, and her voices.*

*My mother had a thing for accents. She learned a bunch when she was in acting school way before I was born, which is how she met my father. Well, sort of. She moved to Harlem from South Carolina to be an actress, and he moved up here from Baltimore to do the same thing. Only difference is, she went to acting school, and he “went with his gut,” as he puts it. While they both waited for their big breaks, they worked in a soul food restaurant. Dad was a dishwasher, and Mom was a waitress, where she tried out her crazy accents on random customers. She said it was always funny when people would get confused, hearing a little country mixed in with Russian (especially coming from a black girl). The French one was my favorite—it was the one she did the most. *Oui, oui*, never again. Only *au revoir*.*

*Now the house was totally silent. And it had no smell. It was empty, and for the first time it actually felt that way. Stale. Old, but I guess new at the same time. My first thought as I walked in was to call out for her like she normally did when I got home. But I caught myself. Instead I just sat at the kitchen table and looked around at all the things that I was used to, that now suddenly seemed so strange.*

*The sink. There were no dishes in it. No pots, no pans. The clock radio flashed 4:04 p.m. in green digital numbers. A photo was taped to the wall just above the faucet of my mother and father when they were much younger, holding my hand on the boardwalk at Coney Island. They looked happy. I looked miserable. I don't even remember taking that picture. It was my first trip to the beach. My mother always teased me about how I didn't understand what sand was, and how I was afraid to let it touch my feet. So I cried most of the trip. The photo had started to change colors, especially at the corners, which were fading into a weird brown, probably because of the steam coming from the sink over the years. I never really cared too much about that picture, but all of a sudden it seemed special. Us as a family.*

*I glanced at the old cooking notebook my mom made for me sandwiched between the can of sugar and the can of flour on the counter. It was where my mother wrote easy recipes for me to make. It was like her way of passing*

*the cooking torch so that I could do my thing in the kitchen without having to open up one of those lame, thick usually way too girly cookbooks. I grabbed it and sat back at the kitchen table. Written on the blue, nasty-stained cover was THE SECRET TO GETTING GIRLS, FOR MATTY, in my mother's loopy cursive. That was our joke, that cooking is what girls really like. Her telling me that definitely made me feel better about being a dude and knowing what a whisk and a colander are. That's for damn sure.*

*I had tried to open it a few days before, but couldn't do it. Figured I'd give it another shot. I cracked it open and smack dab in the middle.*

*THE OMG OMELETTE FOR MATTY (THANKS FOR TEACHING ME "OMG")*

*Closed it. Immediately. Even though I was starving and that omelette—the OMG Omelette—would've been the spot, I couldn't do it. Her writing, I could hear her voice . . . NO!*

*I slid the notebook to the other side of the table like it was possessed, leaned back in my chair, and yanked the refrigerator door open. Bread. Butter. Half carton of eggs. Milk. Half an onion turning brown. Two Chinese food cartons, one with bits of fried rice stuck to the sides, a white plastic fork sprouting from the top, and the other with some sort of sauce caked around the rim. That's pretty much what me and Dad had been eating. Takeout. Obviously. Seeing as though I couldn't even keep the notebook open for ten damn seconds.*

*I grabbed the Styrofoam container with the sauce. Shrimp and Broccoli. I sniffed it. Ugh! Chinese leftovers were not on the menu for tonight's dinner. Not unless I wanted the next funeral I went to to be my own.*

*Still, instead of just whipping up something quick (we always at least had pasta in the house, and I didn't need to check the notebook to boil water), off to the bodega I went with two dollars crumpled in my pocket. I figured I could talk Jimmy into letting me walk with a sandwich, and getting the extra dollar to him later. Jimmy was the guy who owned the bodega. He was probably in his forties and was from Pakistan, even though everyone in the hood thought it was funny to just say he was from Iraq. The only reason I knew he was from Pakistan is because I asked. My mother made me. "Don't be ignorant," she used to say. I also know his real name is not Jimmy, but Ahmed, which he also told me. He's a good guy, but he's crazy. One time some dude came in there and tried to steal. Jimmy pulled the biggest knife I ever seen—I mean, like a machete—from behind the register and started banging the blade on the counter. He started screaming something about this being his neighborhood to everybody. Everybody in there was scared. The guy who was trying to steal just put the chips back and apologized. Jimmy told everybody in the store that day to never, ever try to steal from him and that if you're short, just say you're short and he'll try to work with you. He then said that if he catches anyone stealing, he'll leave their fingers on the bodega floor for the cat to nibble on. Gross. But nobody tries to take anything anymore so I guess he proved his point.*

*I stepped into the store and was greeted by the rank smell of cat litter and cooked cold-cut meat.*

*"A little bit of mayo. Just a little bit," a young guy said to Mike the sandwich maker, whose name also wasn't Mike, but Tahir. "Y'all be gettin' mad heavy-handed on the mayo. And put sweet peppers on there for me, man, dude."*

*Jimmy sat behind the counter, divvying out loosie cigarettes, matchbooks, blunt cigars, lotto tickets, and din-*

candy.

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“Matty, what’s good, baby?” he said in his weird, mixed-up, Arabic–New York accent.

“I’m good,” I said, walking up to the counter.

Jimmy leaned over a little. “Yo, I heard about Mrs. Miller. Sorry ’bout that, fam. How y’all holdin’ up?” he whispered, trying to be respectful.

“We good,” I said, short, and looked away. I just didn’t really want to go into all that standing in the middle of the bodega. I didn’t even know how he knew. I take that back; yes I did. People come in the bodega running their mouths all the time. It was the only place outside of church you could find out anything and everything about the hood, even though most of it was made up. I kind of wanted to know what he had heard. Like, who were people saying she died from? Knowing this neighborhood, people were probably saying it was a drug overdose because that’s always what people say. “Yeah, she used to get high. That’s why she was always so funny,” they were probably saying. So I didn’t even bother to ask. Didn’t matter what they thought.

I slid my wrinkled dollars up on the counter almost as if it were a secret note I was passing in class.

“What you need, man?” Jimmy asked, adjusting his Nets cap.

“I need a sandwich. I’m short a single, but I’ll get it to you tomorrow,” I said softly.

Without even thinking about it, Jimmy took the two bucks and threw them in the register. And then he yelled something in Arabic to Mike, who stood behind the meat cutter holding a turkey breast in his arms like a football. Mike said something back. It all sounded like a whole bunch of throat clearing, but I was used to it.

“Matty, you know you family, and I know you or your pops is good for it. Matter fact, take two. One for Mrs. Miller.” Jimmy smiled and held out his fist for a pound.

I walked over to Mike. He just nodded, which was his way of saying, *Can I take your order?*

“Let me get honey-glazed on a roll. Lettuce, tomato, mayo, provolone, sweet peppers, oil and vinegar, black pepper, meat and cheese, hot,” I rattled off like naming brothers and sisters I don’t have. I’ve been ordering the same sandwich since I was a kid. It’s the way my dad orders. “Two of those, please.”

“Three,” a voice came from behind me. “Make that three of those, Mike. Cheddar though, not provolone. Don’t nobody want all that fancy cheese.”

Mike shook his head and smirked.

I turned around, already knowing who I’d see.

“Wassup, Chris.”

“What’s good, Matt.” We slapped hands. “What’s goin’ on?”

I’ve known Chris pretty much my whole life. He lived in the apartment building at the end of the block, and let me tell you, living in a brownstone and living in an apartment building are very different. In a brownstone you either own the whole house like us, or the floors are split between two other families—three, max. But in an apartment building, it’s like twenty families. Sometimes more. So it’s always a bunch of mess going on. That’s how it was in Chris’s building. A bunch of mess. Everybody around here called it the crazy building. There’s always a gang of dudes posted up outside all night, talking trash, and pushing packs of whatever to whoever.

*Nobody even parks their car in front of that building, scared that when they come to get in it in the morning, it'll be sitting on blocks. And that was probably the truth.*

*"Chillin'," I said. "Just grabbing dinner."*

*Mike gave Jimmy my sandwiches, and Jimmy, like always, licked his finger and pulled a paper bag from underneath the counter. He took the bag and flung it in the air, almost as if he was swatting at a fly, just to open the bag up. Of course he could've just slipped his finger in the bag and opened it that way, but Jimmy likes to be cool. The popping sound the bag made made Chris jump a little.*

*"Yo, Matt, wait for me," Chris said, putting a soda on the counter and slapping a five-dollar bill down. "I'll walk with you."*

*My house came way before his, so we stopped and sat on the stoop for a little while. I won't lie, it was cool to have someone around. It had been a minute since I had hung out with anyone—since when my mother transferred to the hospice wing of the hospital. Me and Dad spent most of our time with her, opening the get-well cards and propping them up on the side table by her bed. Dad would always ask if she wanted him to read them to her, but she always said no. Of course he read them out loud anyway. I think he just wanted to believe she would actually get well. Besides the cards, there was a ton of flowers and balloons that came in everyday, from neighbors and friends. Mom hated the balloons. She said they freaked her out at night.*

*"Sometimes I wake up with one of these stupid balloons bopping me in the face, and be ready to crap myself here," she said, snorting a little from her own joke.*

*I, on the other hand, hated the flowers. I mean, they're just stupid. What's the point of getting somebody you care for something they can't do anything with but look at for a few days until it dies. Just seems cruel. But my mom, she loved them. The day she passed, she gave away all the flowers to the nurses, except one bouquet. She said something about them taking up too much space, and that she wanted to give them all a gift for putting up with her anyway, which I'm sure they all deserved, because Daisy Miller was definitely a trip. She told me and Dad to take the last bunch, as well as all the cards. I tried to tell her that we didn't need them and that she should keep them for herself, but Dad gave me that look that means, Just shut up and listen. So I gathered all the cards and notes, and Dad took the flowers. We both thought it was strange. Not her wanting to get rid of the cards—she couldn't care less about them—but definitely her giving away the flowers, or as she called them, her "lovelies." But we didn't question it. We just did what she asked us to do, and ultimately found out the reason why later that night.*

*My father got the call around four in the morning. I wasn't asleep, and neither was he. He'd been down in the kitchen, pouring shot after shot of cognac since around midnight. He'd pulled the bottle out of the cabinet and set it on the table when we first got home, but he didn't drink any. Even though my mother would have a drink even now and then, I had never seen my pops take even a sip. But I could tell he was thinking about it. And I couldn't blame him. He just flipped from card to card, reading the get-well messages out loud to me like bedtime stories. At one point I thought he was going to offer me a drink, y'know, as some kind of father-son bonding thing, but he didn't. He just let the bottle sit there like it was a third person in the room. I stared at the flowers and thought*

*about just trashing them since they'd be dead by the morning anyway. Pointless.*

*I knew Dad would be upset about it, but I just couldn't keep my mouth shut. "We really keeping these?" asked, snatching a petal off. Dad kept reading through the cards. "Dad? We might as well just get rid of them. I not like Mom's gonna care. Shoot, they're gonna die anyway."*

*He paused for a second. Then, like I hadn't said a word, he continued with the corny poems with lines like "back on your feet" and "love is the best medicine."*

*I left the flowers alone.*

*Eventually, I dozed off at the table and woke up again and he was still reading. I got up and headed to bed kissing him on his head. When I got halfway up the steps, I finally heard the liquor pouring. Then my father hissing as he swallowed the first shot. Then, pouring again.*

*Hours later, when the phone rang, I didn't hear anything my dad said. But as soon as I'd heard it ring, I knew. A few minutes after the call I heard him slowly coming up the steps. Then, there was a knock at my door.*

*"Come in," I mumbled.*

*When he opened it, I was already dressed. And from what I could tell, we were both already numb.*

*x x x*

*"So what's been going on?" Chris asked about a millisecond before stuffing almost half of his sandwich in his mouth. Strings of shredded lettuce hung from his lips; he pushed the stragglers in with his thumb.*

*"Not much, man, just came from work."*

*"Work? You working? Where?" Chris sounded surprised.*

*"Took a gig after school at Ray's, just helping out with little stuff, y'know? For work study, and for some extra cash for the house and stuff," I explained. "Can't put it all on Dad," I added, still unwrapping my sandwich.*

*"Ray's, like the funeral place?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"Hub," Chris said, while cramming the other half of the sandwich into his face. Watching him eat, all I could think about is how my mother would always get on him about inhaling his food like this. "It ain't gonna run away from you, Christopher," she'd tease while plucking the back of his head. I thought about plucking his hair myself.*

*"You gotta touch dead people?" he said. I could tell this was something he really wanted to know, but after he said it, he instantly got weird because he'd said "dead people," and now my mom was one. But it didn't bother me. "I mean, I mean," he fumbled, "you have to, uh, uh . . ." It was like he was choking on air.*

*"Yep. Gotta touch dead people," I said, putting my hand on his shoulder and squeezing a little.*

*"Come on, man!" he shouted, bits of food flying from his mouth.*

*I laughed. "I'm just playing, man. I ain't touch no dead people, and Mr. Ray told me I don't have to. I just help out with setting up chairs and stuff like that."*

*"Oh." He balled up his sandwich paper and shot it like a basketball at the trash cans sitting in front of me.*

house. Way off.

I could tell he was itching to get his hands on my sandwich paper to try again, but I took my time eating mine. I told him how I felt about school now, and how everybody had been treating me weird—James Skinner and even some of the teachers. He explained that a lot of people wanted to say something to me, or act like everything was cool, but they were scared because they didn't want to make me upset. Everybody thought they were going to say the wrong thing. I told him that I was fine, even though I really wasn't. And I told him that out everybody, I needed him to hold me down and treat me normal just because we had so much history.

"Treat you normal?" he asked, just to make sure he heard me correctly.

"Yep."

"Like usual?"

"Yep. Like usual."

"Oh, okay." He smiled in a sneaky way, flashing his crooked bottom row. "If that's the case, then who the other sandwich for?" he said, eyeballing the paper bag. "Matter fact, how 'bout you whip up some of that Miller magic sauce to go with it. What's the special ingredient again?"

"Garlic powder."

The sauce Chris was talking about was something my mother taught me to make a long time ago. It was in the notebook but it didn't really have a cool title. She said I had to name it myself, so in the book it just said BLANK SAUCE. It's a sauce that pretty much goes with everything. Burgers, chicken, and even bodega sandwiches. It's just ketchup, mustard, honey, brown sugar, and garlic powder, which really kicks up the flavor of anything you're making in the kitchen. I was going to try to get Cluck Bucket to pick it up if I would've taken a job there. Maybe give it some kind of catchy, corny name like All Sauce. That could work.

"Yeah, garlic powder." Chris nodded, anticipating my answer.

"No."

"Come on, man. I thought you said we were going to be normal?"

"We are, but I ain't in the mood to cook nothing."

"Ain't nobody ask you to cook. Just make sauce!" Chris pressed. Then, realizing that I was annoyed, he chilled out. "Okay, okay. Squash the sauce. Just let me have the sandwich."

I laughed and shoved Chris in the shoulder. I guess it would be normal for him to eat his food and mine. The boy was a machine when it came to food.

"No! It's for my dad, man."

"Man, he don't want it," Chris argued.

I laughed again, thinking at first this was more trying-to-get-the-sandwich business. But something in his voice caught my attention.

"Because I just seen your father right before I stopped in the bodega. He's over on Albany, standing outside the liquor store with that fool Cork."

Cork was the youngest Ray brother. He was the brother who they let help out whenever he was around, which

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