

A Man of Exquisite Taste

By Jina DuVernay

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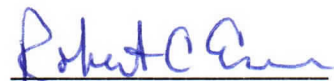
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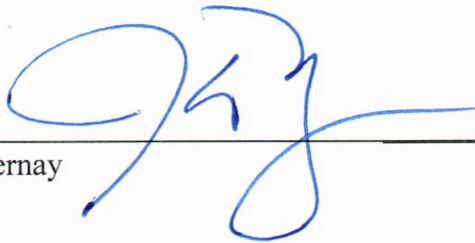
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Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. Romans 5: 1-5

Renee Lavender was a typical teenager; 5'6", brown skin, long, very black silky hair and large, deep brown eyes. She blossomed early so her shape was very womanly by age fourteen. She was of average weight and had the beginnings of Sophia Loren-type cheekbones. She was a chameleon for she could easily pass for an Ethiopian, Dominican or Indian girl.

Renee was appropriately curious, justifiably fearful, distinctively observant, inherently strong and genuinely sensitive. She struggled with growing pains as all teenagers do, but, being a middle child, Renee had an extra dose of the blues. She didn't always feel completely accepted for who she was with her sisters, Lana and Cara. Lana was Renee's older sister, who was into Guns N' Roses and George Michael, while Renee was obsessed with Al B. Sure and N.W.A. The girls were four years apart and had very different interests. And Renee oftentimes felt as though Lana didn't approve of her personality and looked down on her overall character. She didn't always feel like it was acceptable to Lana for her to just be herself. Cara, Renee's younger sister, was much closer to Lana than Renee was. Cara was one year younger than Renee but two grades below her. It wasn't that Renee was a super smart child or that Cara was a slow learning child but merely that Renee's mother, Nadine, had found it to be more economical to have her skip pre-school. Nadine, a single mother of three young girls, worked hard to give her children the best education by putting them in Catholic school and two kids at the school meant that she got a discount. A two-kid discount didn't apply at the daycare; therefore it was implied so Nadine claimed that Renee was a year older than she really was. Renee adapted rather quickly at the private school after being repeatedly reprimanded for lifting up her itchy, plaid uniform skirt while playing chase at recess.

However, because Renee was always two years ahead of Cara, the sisters never really shared the same group of friends and seemed to be in two very different head spaces. Thus, Renee felt most comfortable and valued among her handful of girlfriends. When she was with them she felt that it was completely acceptable to be her natural self. She didn't have to put on any airs or feel judged or not good enough the way she sometimes felt around her siblings. Instead, she was free to be silly, funny and carefree and she cherished her time with her girlfriends. She was each girl's most considerate and loyal friend.

But Renee's loyalty trait didn't end with her friends. Despite sibling squabbles and feelings of mistreatment and isolation at times in her relations with her sisters, Renee was always loyal. Family was extremely important to her. She did her best to be right and respectful towards her sisters and mother. But Renee expected to receive that same respect that she extended to others, and when she felt that it was not being reciprocated, she could become very impulsive. She was overall an optimistic girl but also quite wary of people around her, her mother and sisters included. Renee never strived to be a trouble maker or a problem of any kind but she stood up for what she felt was right.

So when she concluded that her freshman year at her older sister's all-white, all-

girl alma mater was not conducive to her well-being, Renee was determined that her first year there was going to be her last. She safely assumed that her mother would perceive her declaration of independence as earth-shattering news, but Renee felt compelled to make it anyway. She proposed to her mother that she would finish high school at the local public school. She needed boys and black folks. Mexican, Pilipino, Hawaiian people would do as well. It didn't matter, but any place would be better than where she was. Not only was she the only black student in her class, but she was the only black girl in the entire school. Consequently, while studying Paul Laurence Dunbar's poem titled "Sympathy", Renee's English teacher, with a look of sympathy on her face, asked "Renee, can you relate to Dunbar's poem?" Needless to say, she felt like she was being appointed to the unwanted and unspoken position of being an ambassador of the entire black race, when all she was most concerned about was that there were no boys to flirt with. Hence, Renee pleaded her case to her mother daily, even selling her on the fact that she'd be saving a lot of money if she let Renee escape. So after nine years of Catholic school her mother relented and Renee was an official Bulldog at the local public school. 'Boys, here I come', she daydreamed.

And that sophomore year the boys did take to Renee but not in the way they did with most other girls. They treated her more as a homegirl than a girlfriend. Boys were attracted to her physically but more attracted to her carefree, fun attitude. She wasn't childish, but she was in no rush to grow up fast. She didn't try to impress them by wearing skimpy, tight-fitting clothing or play coy around them. Instead, she was the type of girl who would participate in the water balloon fights because she wanted to have fun more than she wanted to keep her hairdo dry and in place. Renee was a classy tomboy, and because of that she got along with everyone: nerds, athletes, round-the-way girls, rough-neck boys. She possessed a natural ability to exhort them all and make them feel counted.

The transition to a new school was seamless, all because on the very first day of school Renee met Kimtrell. Kimtrell was a pretty, mixed girl with light brown skin, very long dark brown hair and thick black eyebrows. She was about the same height and weight as Renee, only she had a man-magnet figure: small on the top, small waist, large hips. Renee, on the other hand, was large on the top, thick in the middle and flat and wide on the bottom. The two girls struck up a conversation while in line to register for classes and once Kimtrell revealed that she, too, was transferring from Renee's old private school, the two immediately became fast friends. Renee admitted that the reason why she might not have ever seen Kimtrell at the private school was because she spent her lunch breaks hidden in the bathroom stall, reading. Thus, the two Catholic girls with an interest in boys and Yo! MTV Raps were inseparable for the duration of their high school years. They told each other everything, shared clothing, ditched class together and laughed and cried together. They were family and, without the other, neither would have survived their teenage years so well.

They met in the mall. She had seen him a couple of times before at her after-school Taco Bell job. He'd park and walk to the window to order, each time with a thugged-out looking guy. He was tall and light-skinned with low-cut sandy, semi-curly hair and green eyes. The main attraction, however, was his Snoop Dogg-like demeanor. He was just cool. He moved slowly, deliberately and with such ease that it seemed as

though he walked on his personal moving walkway - the kind you find in the airport.

Renee and her friend, Nia, were entertaining themselves by walking back and forth in the mall, scoping out cute guys, when she spotted “Cuteness” with his usual rough-looking sidekick.

“Nia!” Renee gasped, excitedly. “That’s him! That’s the guy I was telling you about, the one that I saw at work last week!”

“Where,” Nia asked curiously since she had heard how cute he was.

“Girl, right there! They’re coming this way.” Renee’s voice began to diminish into an almost whisper as she inconspicuously guided her friend to the other side of the pathway so as not to come too close to them.

“What are you doing? Why don’t you wanna walk on their side?”, Nia was confused.

“Ugh! I’m not tryna bump into him,” Renee explained.

“Um, ok,” Nia said, still confused. “Wait: so you don’t want to talk to him?”

Renee gave Nia a look of disgust. “You know I’m not gonna do that.” She was instantly irritated, and before she knew it she was passing Cuteness, her prolonged glance matching his. Suddenly, she was elated. Hyper and overly dramatic, Renee stressed Nia out as they made their umpteenth lap around the mall. She had to come up with a plan, and after dismissing every one of Nia’s suggestions, she insisted that the only logical thing to do was for Nia to walk up to him and tell him that Renee was interested. They had to be quick about it too. Renee didn’t want him to leave the mall before Nia had a chance to get the job done.

So Nia and Renee turned around midway before going to the end of the mall, hoping to see the two guys again. Sure enough, Renee spotted them coming out of an athletic shoe store. She immediately instructed Nia to “Go!” She stood there pretending as though she were being held up by her friend’s crazy, meddling antics. She noticed the sidekick looking her over with obvious approval while urging Cuteness to walk over to her.

“Hi,” Cuteness smiled.

“Hi,” said Renee, trying to remain cool.

“I’m Chauncey; what’s your name?”

‘Of course his name is Chauncey,’ Renee thought, such a sexy name. “Renee.”

“Ok,” Chauncey said, staring, as he rubbed his hands together. “So your friend tells me you wanna talk to me.”

Blushing, Renee replied, “Man, she’s crazy. I just mentioned that I thought you were cute, that’s all.”

“Is that right?”, Chauncey’s smile was intoxicating. “Well, you’re cute yourself. Why don’t you give me your number so I can call you sometime?”

Renee, feeling like she had just scored, nodded her head nonchalantly and said “yeah, ok.”

By now Nia was running out of patience with Chauncey’s sidekick; she kept telling him that she had a boyfriend. But Sidekick didn’t care; he wanted a number too. He liked Nia’s dark brown skin, svelte figure and overly confident demeanor. And he was intrigued by her short, trendy haircut that matched her trendy outfit, which was a cross between bohemian and overtly sexy. The more he begged Nia for her number, the more revolted she became. She had many admirers who liked to buy her the things she wanted. She had a boyfriend, too. And this guy just wasn’t her type. He didn’t look like he could benefit her in any way. Nia finally walked back over to Renee and smiled as she watched Chauncey and her friend bid farewell.

“So?” Nia asked. “Did you give him your number?”

Smiling from ear to ear, Renee said proudly, “yep, and I got his too.”

Two days later, Chauncey called and they stayed on the phone for nearly two hours until he finally submitted to many pleas from his brother (the sidekick at the mall) for him to get off the phone. When Renee hung up the phone, she was completely in love. Soon Chauncey would occasionally come by after school to pick her up and get some fast food before taking her home, each time with his brother in the backseat. And after many interrupted phone conversations, Renee begged for alone time with Chauncey. “Does your brother have to always be around?”, Renee wondered. Chauncey, knowing that Renee would eventually become perturbed by his brother’s presence, promised that he’d take her out on a date, just the two of them. “I’ll make it happen,” Chauncey appeased her.

It was Saturday night and Renee was ready for her very first date ever. She and her friend Kimtrel had spent the entire day going from store to store in search of the perfect outfit for the big night. Renee settled on brown Bermuda shorts, a brown belt, and an ivory mid-drift top. With her belly button exposed, Renee was certain that she’d get her first kiss. After all, she was sixteen years old and she was ready. Plenty of her friends had already gone all the way and she hadn’t even French-kissed a guy yet. She wanted it to happen, but she was nervous because she was sure that Chauncey had already kissed dozens of girls and she didn’t want to disappoint her attractive, eighteen-year-old boyfriend.

After eating at a real restaurant, the couple headed to the movie theatre. Once there, Renee felt pretty special when she witnessed the wad of money that Chauncey pulled out of his pocket to pay for the tickets. ‘Mmm hmm, ladies, that’s my man’, thought Renee. And when he grabbed her hand as they walked inside, Renee was simply on cloud nine.

When the movie let out, Chauncey suggested they drive to a secluded little park that he knew of so they could just “chill by ourselves for a while before I take you home.” Renee, filled with anticipation, willingly agreed and she soon found herself leisurely swinging on a swing in Chauncey’s lap. Then Chauncey’s hand made its way to

her abdomen and she was certain that he could feel her pubic hair through her shorts. This excited Renee and it became apparent that it excited her date as well, for she could feel a bulge between them that wasn't there before. "Renee, you know I'm gonna wanna get a kiss before the night's over, right?" She felt very sixteen.

Chauncey turned onto the dark suburban, cul-de-sac street and parked the car in front of her house. Renee bent down to grab her purse, which she had stuffed under her seat, and accidentally knocked a little box over that was nestled there. Just as she started to retrieve one of the few shiny, golden, metal things that rolled out of the box, Chauncey yelled, "Don't!" Startled, Renee immediately sat back up. "Don't touch those!" Chauncey commanded as he began to pick them up with a bandana. After he put all of the metal back into the box, he noticed Renee's confusion.

"Those are bullets, Renee; you don't touch those with your bare hands."

"Oh, I didn't know", Renee explained, relieved that she hadn't touch them. She was annoyed. 'He was taking this wannabe gansta thing too far,' she thought. 'He wasn't a real thug, not living in a nice, coveted middle class neighborhood.'

"I know." He started to open the door when Renee said, "um can we do it here?" She was absolutely sure that her mother was awake and had a perfect view of the front door area from the living room couch. She didn't want her mother to see her kissing Chauncey. Renee felt that if she did, then her mother would want to talk about him or the date, but if she didn't, then she'd just ask how it went and that would be the end of it. Her mother never really got into much of her business.

Chauncey obliged and, after having to console Renee for disclosing her inability to kiss, he carefully instructed her to open her mouth and let her tongue follow his. Unaware that she was holding her breath, Renee opened her mouth and proceeded to wag her tongue around. It was nerve-wrecking but nice. The best part was that he did not make her feel stupid or incapable. He gave her one last kiss on the lips and walked her to the door.

"How was it?", asked her mother as she headed up the stairs.

"Good. Good night," Renee yelled from the top of the stairs.

"Good night."

A month later Chauncey broke up with Renee at the insistence of his brother, who ridiculed him non-stop for not having had sex with her yet. She was completely oblivious as to why he suddenly wanted to break up with her. Needless to say, she was very sad and confused. She didn't know what she had done wrong until her friend Kenya suggested that it might be because she wasn't having sex with him. Renee was stunned. Chauncey never pressured her about it or even brought it up for that matter. They seemed fine together. But Kenya said that he had had an older girlfriend before he met Renee, and she was positive that he was sleeping with her. The news only deepened Renee's sadness. He didn't want to be with her anymore, and she never got proper closure.

Renee couldn't resist taking the longer route while out driving in order to pass his street. She could see his house from the main boulevard and would very often see him and his brother and a host of other guys who wore nothing but white T-shirts and khakis, the young, black Southern California man's uniform. But this one particular day, Renee caught a glimpse of Chauncey and what looked to be a girl. 'It couldn't be,' reasoned Renee. She made about a dozen U-turn's on the boulevard, acquiring numerous honks from cars that she had inconvenienced as she came to a near stop each time she was about to pass his street.

Then with a slight jerk of her steering wheel, Renee eased methodically down Chauncey's street, as if she were doing a drive-by. As she neared the house, she spotted Chauncey and, through a sudden haze, Renee saw his arm around an older girl! Engrossed in what she was seeing, Renee's foot somehow pressed the pedal all the way down, and before she knew it her car had jumped the curb and was on top of his lawn. Caught completely off guard, Chauncey instinctively ushered the girl and his mother, who was stooped down planting flowers, safely into the house. Chauncey was speechless as Renee yelled out of the window with a bruised heart. She was devastated as she reversed her vehicle over the grass and into the street. She drove home with closure.

"Good sense makes a man restrain his anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression or an offense." Proverbs 19:11

Some days Cali weather will just make you feel wonderful for no apparent reason. You just feel so high; high off that gorgeous, endless sunshine. And when you are that high, well, anything is bound to happen. Anything. So there's Renee, behind the wheel of her old used compact ride, cruisin' like she's pushin' something really fly with her arm and with her head out of the window just inhaling that cool, gentle Cali breeze. She's taking the scenic route home and life is good, all because of that Cali sunshine.

She doesn't flinch when she hears loud banging music getting louder and louder as it approached the red light she was inching up to. She was on an average Long Beach street, so it was anything but unusual to hear a 64' Chevy Impala, or a '57 Cadillac Coupe deVille beatin' up the street, blasting thunderous rap or oldies but goodies. But since she *was* in Cali she looks over as the two cars were simultaneously halted at the red light and instantly her sunshine high gets higher. The driver of the baby blue '64 Impala was none other than Warren G. Well, it must have been the Cali sun that caused her to smile and stare him down as she put both hands on the sides of her steering wheel and motioned as though she were revving up a Nascar racecar. He could do nothing more than smile at the ridiculous challenge.

She'd only been driving a year but Renee was a self-proclaimed superior driver - self-taught on Crenshaw Blvd. She was always the designated driver on Sunday nights, maneuvering her ride with skill at 80 miles per hour to catch up to a car full of cute guys. So, an old Nissan Sentra against an old, totally redone, sparkling clean '64 Chevy: she knew she'd lose but she'd at least make him work for the win.

And they're off! Woohoo! Renee is struggling, but she's in the lead and loses it just that fast as she watches a smiling local celebrity fly by into oblivion. Laughing out loud to herself she continues her scenic route home - just another sunny California day.

Renee: Before Albert

Renee was a cool shorty I went to high school with. She was one of the good girls. Never heard a bad rumor about her...ever. Everyone rightly assumed she was a virgin even when she dated Chauncey, the "bad boy" who went to the continuation school on the other side of town. She was really into him, but that didn't last long. She was his rebound girl until his main chick came back into the picture. Renee was my buddy. Well, she was everyone's buddy for real. She was cool with every clique, no lie. She did stats for the boys' basketball team. That's how I met her. That's how the whole team met her. A lot of dudes wanted to push up, but after hearing that she was linked, so to speak, with Greg Beshears most of them just stayed back. He was the star basketball player, tall and apparently crazy good-looking according to every girl in the city and surrounding cities! I'm wasn't mad at dude.

Anyway, I tried to get at her when I found out from Michael that they were just friends. He said that their mothers worked together and that nothing was poppin' off between them. And even though he put me up on game in a roundabout way by telling me that she was a "good girl", I still stepped to her. But like many dudes before me, Renee quickly put me in the friend zone. And I gotta say I really didn't mind because she was a down girl, laid back, pretty, always wearing her hair in a long, pretty ponytail. She wasn't the flashy kinda pretty girl. She was sort of tall, about 5'6", walnut brown complexion, and sexy eyes with long lashes. Oh, and very nicely proportioned no doubt. You could see that figure but you definitely had to imagine, though, because she didn't wear short skirts and stuff that was too showy. She dressed nice, classy, and regular. She wasn't tryna do too much like most of the girls. Renee was a 'round-the-way-girl', classy style though. She wasn't hood, but you could just tell she was down, which is what made dudes dig her. That and the fact that the girl was mad funny! No lie, she could probably do some stand up or something. She could be real sarcastic but not in a mean way but in a holding her own kinda way.

She was the girl that most guys wish they could get with but knew that they would contaminate her and we all just respected her and didn't want to mess with her like that. Females got along with her too. She never got into catty crap with and hung with all types: the ho's, athletic girls, cheerleaders, nerds. But she ran strong with Michael's best friend's girl, Kimtrell Rodriguez. That was Renee's girl. They were always together, mad tight. She was also real cool with Kenya, too, with her fine self.

Me and Renee kept in touch even after high school for about two years until we just sort of fell off. We would call each other pretty often, just chattin' about whatever, TV shows, parties, work, school. She was at the university, and I was at the junior college at the time. I don't really know what happened for real. Our last conversations, which started to seem to only happen when I called her, were just different. I mean Renee was always so funny and animated. But she started being kinda vague and sounding tired all the time and just blasé. I remember telling her that she sounded different and she said, "I do?" and you could just hear shame and guilt in her voice. I couldn't put my finger on it and didn't want to push, but I could tell that she wasn't the person she used to be. I wonder if she would remember ol' Chubby. That's what they called me in junior high. I lost touch with Renee, but I reminisce about her every once in a while.

Renee wasn't into settling or trying to keep up with her high school peers in the sex department. No, Renee always wanted the real thing. She wanted a guy to love and to make love with, not just to engage in a quickie in the back seat of his car. That was typical and unnecessary. She wanted a proper love affair. She wanted to do things the right way, the way it was done in the movies.

She was a romantic and listened to love songs at night until she fell asleep. One song in particular rarely played on the late night radio show. It was the song of songs to Renee. It was "Adore" by Prince. The very first note sent chills through her entire body. She wanted a man to adore her the very way she would adore him. One night, Renee was lucky enough to catch the song on the radio at the very beginning and jumped up to hit record on the tape recorder, simultaneously standing there with her finger on the pause button so as not to capture the deejay's voice at the end of her all-time favorite ballad. She listened to that song over and over again.

With nothing but slow jams to make up her love life, Renee was a still a virgin when she got to college. The only person that went to her same college from high school was a girl who was known to be very promiscuous. And as fate would have it, it wasn't long before the two girls were fast friends, or so Renee thought. Marchelle was jealous of Renee. Renee was funny, likeable and always so comfortable and free when hanging out with guys from school. She joked with them and laughed hard with no pretense or sexual tension. And they flocked to her because it was easy to be around her, which in turn made it a no-brainer for Marchelle to be around her.

The two were such complete opposites when it came to guys. Marchelle needed attention desperately and Renee was more laid back. She desired the attention of males as much as any other young girl but only from guys of substance, not just any idiot wannabe. These guys were young and wanted just one thing only and Renee didn't feel like any of them were worth her virginity. But even though she wasn't ready to go all the way, she started to feel like she wanted to at least make out. After all, she was never able to really get involved in conversations that her friends had about boys, not really. She had no stories to compare and no experiences to agree with, but one night that all changed.

Renee and Marchelle were out of school on Christmas break. They had been going out every single night, literally. One particular night they met two cute, funny guys, and Renee thought she had really come across something with the tall one. Albert was very attractive in that manly I-know-how-to-dress-and-smell-good-but-I'm-not-worried-about-girly-things-such-as-ironing type of way. He had tight, sleepy, intense eyes. The kind of eyes that said, "I'm experienced with a slow hand and I got you." Renee thought, 'who couldn't trust a guy with eyes like those?' So after meeting each other at the hamburger spot and exchanging phone and pager numbers, Renee and Albert said goodbye to one other while Marchelle was still flirting with Albert's best friend Larry. Marchelle finally made it back to the car and Renee drove her home. She noticed the brand new, shiny car parked in the driveway that Marchelle's parents had just purchased for her as she watched her go inside the two-story house. She kind of missed the days when she didn't have to bother with paying bills and rent.

Renee was seventeen and had been living on her own for almost a year. Unbeknownst to her, Renee's mother, Nadine, decided to relocate to Montgomery, Alabama. It made perfect sense to Nadine; after all, Maury, her second husband of ten

years, was born and raised there, and she thought it would be a better place to raise their two young sons. So the summer before Renee's sophomore year, Nadine gave her a proposition: move with her to Alabama or go live in the dorms on campus. Since moving to Alabama of all places was not an option, Renee began to search for an apartment. 'Why live in a dorm and have to share some cramped room with a stranger when I can just get my own place?', Renee reasoned. Thus, weeks after securing a little apartment close to campus, afforded by her part-time retail job and financial aid, Renee waved good-bye to her mother, step-father, younger sister and brothers while watching the back of the U-haul disappear.

Renee arrived at her apartment and could hear the phone ringing. She fumbled for her keys as she hurriedly unlocked the door and ran to pick it up.

"Hello?"

"Girl, why didn't you call me back? I've been paging and calling you!", Marchelle shouted.

"What? I barely walked in. What's up?"

"You've gotta hurry and come back and get me! I talked to Larry and he wanted to hook up tonight so I told him that they could come over and we could all hang out. So they're on their way to your place right now!"

"What! Why did you do that? Oh my goodness, I can't have them coming over here now! You told them where I lived?" Renee panicked at the thought that they could be knocking on her door any minute and she'd be there by herself with them. So she told Marchelle she'd come right back out and get her. Sensing her annoyance, Marchelle began to spin the story, a tactic she mastered quite well.

"Larry called me and said that Albert really liked you and really wanted to see you tonight but was too nervous to call you. And I know that you like him so I just thought it would be cool to hang out tonight."

"Yeah, whatever it's cool."

They got back to Renee's place and straightened up a bit. Marchelle continued with her manipulation and kept talking until Renee was excited about the fact that the guys were coming over. Soon the four of them were laughing and flirting together. After some time, Albert suggested that he and Renee talk alone in her bedroom. He locked the door behind him. He began to touch and feel her and grind her. She moaned and giggled, enjoying the pleasure she felt. She couldn't believe she was finally making, out and it felt so good.

Then Albert said, "Do you have a condom?"

Horried at the thought that he was under the impression that she'd sleep with him, she quickly said, "No, of course I don't have a condom. I don't just have condoms lying around. I don't have any need for them anyway."

He looked at her like she was stupid and laughed, "What you mean you don't have a need for 'em? You tryin' to tell me you don't have sex? What - you a virgin or somethin'?"

"Yeah. I am."

Laughing, Albert said, "What? For real!?"

"Yeah."

"That's cool. Well, we don't need one anyway then."

Frowning, Renee said, "Uh, right because we're not having sex."

"Why not? You wanna stay a virgin forever?"

"Of course I don't, but I'm not tryin' have sex with you right now."

"Alright, alright. Well, lemme just rub it on you. I promise I won't put it in." He could tell he needed to press her further, so he continued to persuade her and entice her, convincing her that he would not push inside her and that it would feel good. Wanting to continue experiencing "making out" for the first time, she conceded, believing that he understood that they weren't going to have sex. Suddenly, there was pain. She was terrified and speechless. Her body became reflexive in its attempt to defend and protect her, using all of its strength to try to push him away before it really happened. Before she was stripped bare of her person, her identity, and her esteem, she gasped and repeatedly pleaded, "No. Please no!" But it was too late. Pinned down, she was paralyzed by panic as the pain increased. Instantly, she was broken in more ways than one. She was now just a stoic version of herself.

Minutes later it was over and after he got up to finally open the door in an effort to stop Larry from banging on it and threatening to break it down. Larry was in the other room with Marchelle and kept asking her if she heard that. "Hear what?" Marchelle said, knowing that she heard Renee saying "no" several times. She was perturbed that Larry heard too and was actually bringing it up while she was trying to seduce him. She didn't care how it was going down in the other room so long as it went down and little Miss Perfect Virgin was a virgin no more.

Larry shoved Marchelle away. He got up and yelled to his best friend through the locked door and insisted that he stop and open the door immediately. Albert opened the door and zipped up his pants. Meanwhile, panic shifted into shock when Renee wrapped herself with the sheet that the crime was just committed on. Her big eyes grew bigger and her face covered with grief when she witnessed her blood on the sheet. Larry saw it at the same time and was livid. He grabbed Albert by the shirt and pushed him into the closet door, cursing him. Albert just kept his head down.

Marchelle ushered Renee into the bathroom and locked the door, submitting to the awful timing of having to play the concerned friend. Then Albert banged on the bathroom door and ordered Marchelle out. Finally, she thought, since she was bored with having to console Renee and anxious to get back to a calmer Larry. Albert began to tell Renee that everything was okay; that she was fine and that it was a mistake and that he was sorry. He rubbed her and held her and caressed her. Then Larry told Albert to leave and go to the car. He looked in on Renee, embarrassed, saddened and sorry. She just

stood there, emotionless, leaning her back on the sink in her bra, panties around her thighs, wrapped in a sheet.

Once they had gone, Marchelle was frozen with paranoia. She had to think fast as she escorted a lifeless Renee into the living room and sat her down on the couch. She knew that she wasn't going to be any good at comforting her and was at a loss as to what to do or say next. And then she blurted, "Maybe you should call Kenya."

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all" Psalm 34:19

Marchelle called Kenya and told her that Renee needed to talk to her because she was upset. She told her that they met a couple of guys and that Renee just had sex with one of them and was now pretty shaken up about it. "What?", Kenya shouted, not believing her ears. What Marchelle told her was so far-fetched, so unlike Renee. Immediately, her radar kicked in, and she just knew that something was not right. She told Marchelle to put Renee on the phone, and after probing her friend, who sounded like she was in a complete daze, she concluded that Renee had been raped. But Kenya was confused. If Renee was being raped in the next room, why didn't Marchelle rush in to help? She assured Renee that she would be okay and asked her if she was hurt. Renee was half listening to Kenya so she asked to speak to Marchelle again. And once Marchelle got wind that Kenya was becoming increasingly angry with her for not going in the room to see what had been going on, Marchelle took the phone into the bathroom, and it was there that she began to persuade Kenya into thinking that Renee was completely fine. She told her that Renee was excited to have the guys over and that she wanted to be with Albert but then quickly regretted it and therefore decided it was rape. Kenya felt bad for Renee but agreed with Marchelle that a lot of girls do that when they have regrets about having sex. So that was that. Marchelle offered the apple and Kenya bit. So by the time Kenya spoke with Renee again, Renee found herself feeling very alone while trying to explain herself and convince Kenya the sex had been in no way consensual.

The night was long and Marchelle, pleased with herself for having established an ally in the mess she found herself in, called her sister to pick her up. After what seemed like an eternity of awkwardness, Marchelle's sister finally honked. Relieved, Marchelle blew Renee a kiss and disappeared. Renee walked into the bedroom, balled up the gray, blood-stained flannel sheets and matching pillowcases, walked outside barefoot, and threw them into the dumpster. Cold, she went back into her now dreary apartment, locked up, and released agonizing sobs in a steam filled shower.

The next day Renee, unsure of what to think or feel, tried to resume her life as normal, but her constant feeling of uncertainty about everything made that hard to do. She was agitated about what to wear out to the store. She had no patience to comb her hair, so she didn't. She was in a daze as she drove in silence to the market. And once she arrived, she suddenly felt too scared to go inside. There were so many people all around. The anxiety overwhelmed her, so she decided to just go through a drive-thru at the closest fast food restaurant. She rushed home, closed the curtains, and ate in the quiet, dimly lit apartment.

And then the phone rang. It was Albert. Worried that she might broadcast what had taken place the night before to the wrong people, he told her that he was thinking

about her and wanted to know if she was ok. He said that he liked her and wanted to see her again very soon. And in an attempt to pick her brain, he asked ever so smoothly, "So what now?" Renee replied in a kind of whisper, "I don't know." Her mind betrayed her. In the midst of the confusion in her head and the chaos in her heart, Renee concluded that they should be together.

"I guess I should be your girlfriend now", she stated matter-of-factly.

"Well, why don't we just take it slow, alright?", Albert carefully responded.

"Yeah, alright."

In the days that followed, she did not attend classes or work. She told her employer she was sick and wouldn't be in for a few days. She just wanted to be alone. She stayed inside and kept the television on around the clock so that she didn't feel totally alone. One day her friend Chubby called. During their unusually strained conversation, Chubby said, "You sound different.you seem harder in a way." Those words pierced her heart, and when they hung up the phone, she cried in mourning.

After rationalizing and analyzing that night in her apartment, Renee decided that she was fine. She opened her curtains and went back to her classes. She even walked back into a SistaPals meeting on campus. She began going every week as soon as she saw a flyer advertising the group, which met weekly so that members could share thoughts and ideas and talk about their experiences of being a minority on campus. She had missed two meetings during her hiatus, so when the counselor asked what was new, Renee brought her and the six other girls up to date. "Well, nothing much. I've just been working and thinking about moving in with my friend Kimtrel. She says she's ready to get her own spot, and I was telling her that I'm beginning to hate my place, so we thought we'd get an apartment together. And other than that, um, I was raped, and I think that has something to do with me just wanting a fresh start and move out of there."

The girls' mouths dropped open and they had stunned looks on their faces, and the one who was doodling, only interested in what she came to say, dropped her pen. The counselor crinkled her forehead, clearly concerned, and began to probe. Renee was a favorite of hers because of her humor and candor. She always brought great enthusiasm to the group and, best of all, she always tried to recruit other black students to join them each week. But Renee just replied that she was fine and said, "I never thought 'why me' because who am I? Why not me? Stuff just happens, right? But, I'll be fine."

The meeting ended with the girls rushing out, too embarrassed to look at Renee and eager to get outside to talk about what they had just heard. Then the counselor gave Renee her card and told her to call her office so that she could schedule a private session each week because she felt that they should "discuss the incident a bit more." Renee, figuring that was unnecessary but not wanting to be impolite and reject the admired counselor, agreed.

After a few weeks of Renee insisting that she was fine and that she was just trying to be positive about the whole thing, she thanked the counselor for the sessions and said that she'd rather not have a standing appointment but that she'd rather contact her if she needed to talk. Not getting much out of her, the counselor submitted. Renee was relieved, for they started talking about family, and she was soon labeled a co-dependent

and passive aggressive, terms she was unfamiliar with but quickly assumed weren't the best things to be called. Thus, of course, that was the last session the two ever had.

Renee couldn't breathe in her apartment. She found everything wrong in it. She hated how big the living room felt. And she stopped going into the kitchen altogether; she thought the dark wood cabinets were too dreary. Yet she detested the large, wide front window because it brought in too much light. She kept the heavy, now seemingly old-fashioned drapes closed at all times. The only light that was emitted came from one small lamp, which was rarely used or the television.

Her apartment began to resemble a rebellion against housekeeping - not in a gross, deplorable way but rather a nonchalant way. She'd kick her shoes off at the door each day, forming a small pile, and leave her jacket draped over her living room chair. The apartment was now full of clutter and disarray, which was not typical of the once organized and fairly neat Renee. Her lackluster tidiness was evident; things were just not where they belonged. The bathroom tissue that she bought from the store was just left on her dining room table, and mail she'd opened in the bathroom remained on the tiled floor.

Soon Renee just knew she had to leave and start fresh and new. She suggested to Kimtrell that they move in together. She knew Kimtrell loved the idea of moving out of her mom's house, and since Renee was becoming more and more depressed and lonely she thought it was the perfect plan. It was just what she needed. It would solve everything, and all would go back to normal. She was sure that having the comfort of her own best friend right there at home day in and day out would surely pick up her spirits. Kimtrell agreed, knowing that having a roommate would gain her mother's consent. And thus it was settled. Renee's lease would be up in one month and in her mind she was already gone. She was feeling better already. She had fixed herself; she had a brilliant solution to her problems.

Her certainty was such that it needed to be commemorated with a celebration. What better time than on her birthday, which just so happened to be two weeks before the end of her lease? She knew just what to do. She called her friend Devin and suggested that they have a joint birthday party since their birthdays were so close together. The two met one night at Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles after cruising down Crenshaw Blvd. Renee was attracted to Devin and he was attracted to her. But before they could even speak, Nia swooped in and landed his number. Devin and Nia double-dated a few times with Renee and one of Devin's friends, in whom she had zero interest. But there was always a little tension between Renee and Devin. He was just sexy; there was no other way to describe him. However, out of respect for her friend, Renee declined to go out with him when he and Nia didn't work out.

Renee assured Devin that she'd get the girls, no problem; his responsibility was to bring the guys to the party, but he didn't have to bring what's-his-name - his double-date friend. After effortless persuasion, Devin agreed. Of course he'd be there and it'd be the party of the year. And it was, thanks to the abrupt interruption from the police. Their arrival was the stamp of approval that solidified how "dope" the party was. A few "folks from around the way" left after the little police inconvenience, feeling lucky they didn't get patted down. The rest stayed and continued to drink, flirt and two-step. Even Renee slow danced with Devin. She would not normally be caught dead dancing like some of these girls in the clubs. She was too cool for that. She just didn't find it necessary;

besides, she preferred to be on her guard. There were too many times that she and her girlfriends had to take off their heels to make a run for it after hearing gunfire ring out at places they should have never been.

But tonight was a special night, and she was feeling carefree. Her friends could not accuse her of dressing and acting somewhat prudent tonight - not on the night she was celebrating her birthday and her eventual freedom from loneliness and despair. Renee curled her medium-length bob and bought a black mini-skirt with four large buttons that ran down the middle. Her sheer mid drift top, black bra and black heeled Mary Jane shoes completed the 90210-inspired outfit. All the girls gave Renee kudos for shocking them with her drastic makeover.

The way she swayed her hips when she walked, flipped her hair when she talked, and laughed her flirty laugh all confirmed that she knew she looked sexy. Devin knew it too; he placed his hand on the small of her back as they danced. "You look good," Devin whispered in her ear. She responded with a smile, feeling tipsy. Devin took her smile to be a cue to keep it friendly, and so he did.

After many, many drinks and another visit from the police, the party was over. With her mouth smeared with lip-stick, Renee stood on the balcony waving good-bye to her friends below. Kimtrell had to be back home by a certain time so she wouldn't have to hear her mother's nagging, so it was just Kenya who stuck around until everyone was gone.

"Girl, everybody was here!" Kenya said as she pulled her extra-long, black, silky hair off her flawless dark chocolate skin.

"I know! Kenya, I had so much fun." Renee gladly admitted.

"Um, I guess you did! Devin was all over you!", Kenya stated excitedly, approving of him. Kenya could sometimes be slightly protective of Renee. For starters, she was a year older than nineteen-year-old Renee; in fact, all of Renee's girlfriends were older than her because she started school early. Kenya was also perceived to be wiser than her counterparts because she had a five-year-old son. She was the only one who returned to high school after having her baby due to her dad's insistence that her pregnancy would not stop her from excelling in life.

"Yeah, but we're strictly friends."

Kenya, smiling, rolled her eyes. "I know, I know."

"He's a good guy.", Renee declared proudly. The friends began to throw bottles and red plastic cups into large trash bags. "Kimtrell obviously had a good time", said Renee, hinting about her behavior.

"Yeah, girl, both of you surprised me! I mean you in a skirt and drinkin'?! I couldn't believe it and when you started dancin' with Devin I was like 'ok she must be drunk', 'cause I know you don't dance."

Amused, Renee explained that it was her birthday party, and she just wanted to get a little wild.

“Well, you did,” Kenya confirmed. “And your girl Kimtrel was getting a little wild and crazy too. Did you see her dancin’ on the chair? Now I ain’t neva seen her dance before. I didn’t even know she could!” Kenya laughed. “Seemed like she was lovin’ all that attention from Devin’s homeboys too.”

“Yeah, she was puttin’ on a little show,” Renee recollected with disdain.

“Oh well, she was just havin’ a good time I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Why you sound salty?” Kenya was confused. She knew Kimtrel was Renee’s best friend.

“I’m not salty,” Renee quickly exclaimed. “It’s just that we’re moving in together in like a week, and I don’t know now if that’s the best thing to do or not because she been wilin’ out lately,” Renee explained, sounding very concerned.

“Renee, she probably just extra excited to be movin’ out her mamma’s house. You been out, she hasn’t.”

“I didn’t act all crazy when I first moved here!” Renee blurted.

“Yeah, well you’re different. You always had everything together and under control.” To that, Renee cringed mentally, ‘if she only knew’ she thought. “She’s just now gettin’ free, that’s all, it’ll be fine.” said Kenya confidently, for she’d been living on her own for two years now. She was a move-out-on-your-own pro. Of course, she made it look easy because her father supported her financially so that she could stay in school. He was her only means of income since her child’s father was incarcerated and would be for quite a while - namely for life. But her father could afford it; he was an engineer or something like that and even though he was divorced from Kenya’s mother, he was still her sole provider as well. Renee always thought he was a really nice guy.

“We’ll see. I did tell her, though, that Dummy couldn’t come around if she ever decided to start seeing him again,” Renee informed her in an attempt to reassure herself.

Laughing, Kenya said, “What? For real? And what’d she say?”

“She told him that wasn’t gonna be a problem because she was never talkin’ to him again. She says she’s done with him for real.”

Kenya just looked at Renee with a smirk that made her nervous.

“What?”, Renee asked anxiously.

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Why you lookin’ like that then?”, Renee was getting irritated now.

“Girl, do you really think that she is done with that idiot?”

“Um, yeah! She said she was and she better be if we gonna do this!”

Kenya could see that Renee was getting hyper, so she just nodded in agreement and suggested that they finish cleaning up so she could go pick up her son from her mother’s house.

 “We did it!”, exclaimed Renee, relieved.

“I know! I’m so excited. It is *so* nice and we got a great deal! I can’t believe it. She hooked us up.” Kimtrell was beaming, referring to the leasing agent for their new apartment in Long Beach. This was her very first apartment - and it wasn’t just any apartment, it was a modern, look-at-me-I’ve-arrived apartment, and it was just what she wanted. Kimtrell liked nice things, and the apartment she and Renee had just secured was exactly that. Renee, who was just glad to be out of her first apartment, was a proud Payless shoe kind of girl, while Kimtrell was name brand everything. Renee found it thrilling whenever she was asked where she got her shoes or clothing because when she divulged Payless and Target, people were always visibly and pleasantly shocked. Renee had a knack for spotting gems at low-end stores. She had to; both she and Kimtrell were far from rich. They were only able to afford their new apartment because they were splitting the rent.

“Yeah, and I’m so glad that we were able to get the keys now because my lease is up this weekend.”

“Yup, perfect timing. I’m gonna get my dad and brother to help me move my stuff on Saturday,” Kimtrell said, overjoyed.

“Well, I’m gonna start loading my car tomorrow and start bringing the small stuff over every day,” said Renee.

“You said Devin and his friends were gonna help you, right?”, Kimtrell inquired.

“Yeah, he told me just to tell him when and he’d get them to come and help, so I’m gonna call him when I get home.”

“All right. Well, let’s just go up one more time and check it out!” Kimtrell’s excitement increased when Renee agreed. They got on the elevator and stopped at the fourth floor. A grimy-looking half-Black, half-Korean guy entered and pressed the button for the fifth floor. “Where you pretty ladies going?”

“We just moved in!”, Kimtrell blurted. “We’re on the thirteenth floor.”

The door opened on the fifth floor, but the man remained on the elevator. Renee was annoyed and suspicious as she observed the man continue to flirt effortlessly with Kimtrell. She was on heightened alert when the man followed them out of the elevator, only to have Kimtrell point out the exact apartment where they’d be living. When the man finally left and they were safely inside, Renee scolded Kimtrell for showing “some strange-looking stranger” where they lived. Kimtrell didn’t pay her any mind. She

thought Renee was too uptight, too serious and too careful sometimes, but that was just how she was, and Kimtrell accepted her anyway. Kimtrell began to tour her first apartment while Renee went on and on about how unsafe that was and how she needed to be more careful. When they got back to their cars, Kimtrell attempted to appease Renee by assuring her that he seemed like a nice guy and that everything was cool. She said okay, and they said good-bye, but Renee was worried.

Once the friends were settled in their apartment, Renee was certain that she had made the right decision. Moving in with her best friend was like a prolonged slumber party, but after about a week her certainty began to wane. She had just finished taking tedious but vital lecture notes in her Psychology class and she was tired. She stopped for a cheeseburger combo at Jack-In-The-Box and was just glad to be home. When she walked in she was greeted by the grimy Black Korean elevator dude who was helping himself to something to drink from the refrigerator. Renee was stunned. She watched his lips touch the rim of one of her drinking glasses in between rambunctious laughter as he listened to Kimtrell tell some apparently funny story from the living room. ‘Why in the world,’ Renee wondered, ‘would she have this person they knew nothing about in their apartment?’ Renee was visibly perplexed. And to make matters worse, Kimtrell had obviously made the intruder feel quite at home as he familiarized himself with all of their belongings.

Kimtrell knew that Renee was livid by the look on her face. If there was one thing Renee could not hide, it was her feelings. But Kimtrell was having too much fun to be concerned with another one of Renee’s disapprovals, so she just said, “Hey, Renee.” “Hey,” Renee said dryly under the guise of composure. She walked into her dark room and slammed the door. It seemed as if the rowdy laughter got more thunderous with each bite of her food. Fury eventually lulled her to sleep.

It was not long before Renee began to realize that the safe-haven she thought she had created by room-mating with Kimtrell was the exact opposite. She never knew who might be behind her front door when she arrived home, sitting on her couches or eating off of her plates. And although Kimtrell swore that she would never get back with her ex-boyfriend again, Dummy in fact became a regular guest. Renee soon recognized that she was still depressed, and the fact that she and Kimtrell were not getting along only compounded her sadness and hopelessness.

She began to gravitate toward Kenya more. Kenya was a good friend. She could always be counted on to lend an ear to Renee’s many complaints about her living situation. She also offered Renee a solution. Kenya concluded that all Renee needed to do was to join her and her friends when they went out to the clubs; in fact, she insisted that she do so.

“Just get out of there, Renee.”, Kenya commanded. “You don’t need to be sittin’ in your dark room while she’s in there with her man having a good time. Come out with us.”

Renee didn’t feel like doing much of anything, let alone getting dressed up to put herself on display. But after much persuasion, Renee became almost addicted to the night life. She would help prepare the pink lemonade, Vodka and whip cream concoction that she and her friends would down before piling in the car en route to the first club of the night. Her skirts became a little shorter and her heels a little taller. She was having the time of her life. She attended class only periodically. She made it to the important

ones, attending the lectures to get all of the pertinent notes. Her method gained her a C average, and she was fine with that. After all, she would still be eligible for financial aid with that average and she needed money to get into the clubs and buy new clothes.

One night Kenya spotted a tall, extremely cute guy standing near the bar. All of her friends gawked at him and positioned themselves in their unique flirtatious ways. Even the ones who didn't think he was that attractive wanted him because the other girls did. Although Renee was also attracted to the guy, whose height commanded attention, she was more interested in being with her girlfriends than getting another guy's number. She just enjoyed being out of her apartment and away from her daily bickering with Kimtrell. Renee, feeling cute and a little buzzed, stood there aloof, listening to the deafening music in the club. Perhaps it was her lack of interest that drew the tall guy over to her. They talked briefly, and he left with her number which earned Renee a few unspoken jealous insults from some of her acquaintances. Kenya, however, gave her the thumbs up, and they both shared a smile. Kenya hoped Renee would meet someone and get happy.

A few nights later, Renee and the tall club guy, Frank, planned to have movie night at her apartment. He was to bring the movie and she would order the pizza when he got there. Frank arrived and could hear giggling and other noises behind a closed door as Renee led him down the hall to her room. Renee explained that that was her roommate's room just as Kimtrell stuck her head out of the door to see who was coming in. Renee just glanced at her and kept walking. She didn't feel the need to inform Kimtrell that she was having company since Kimtrell didn't give her the same courtesy. Kimtrell shut the door, aware of their growing distance and unwillingness to fix it. 'Renee ought to get over herself; if she thought I was going to move away from home to live like a nun like her, then she was horribly mistaken,' Kimtrell thought.

After the pizza was gone and the general conversation topics were exhausted, Frank and Renee sat on her bed in the dimly lit blue room, with their eyes were both glued to the boring Western he had brought over. The silence was broken, however, when Frank smoothly put his hand on Renee's thigh during a lame sex scene.

"I don't have that much experience." Renee explained, taking Frank off guard.

Suddenly, he was both nervous and curious. "Um, that's ok," he assured her, not expecting to sleep with her that night.

"I've only done it once and I was forced."

Frank's hand jumped off of her thigh. 'Did I hear her right', he wondered. He was uncomfortable and was unsure of what to say or do. "Wow" was all that he could come up with. They continued to watch the movie in silence. Frank was hoping it would end soon so he could make his exit and stop feeling so awkward. "You wanna do it?", Renee matter-of-factly inquired as the credits began to roll. Frank's eyebrows shot up and he said "yeah" as though he were answering a trick question.

They had sex. Frank tried to enter Renee from the back but promptly stopped when he heard her moan "ouch" and proceeded to pound her missionary style; Renee seemed oblivious. When he was done, she got up to hand him his movie. At the front door he said, "I'll call you" to which Renee quickly said, "No, no, don't call me, I'll call you." Frank nodded, knowing she never would, and made his escape.

The next morning Renee went into the kitchen to make instant coffee when Kimtrell walked in. The girls moved around one another without speaking until Kimtrell threw something in the trashcan and yelled, “Renee?!” Renee, surprised, jerked her head up and looked at her. “Oh my gosh! Renee!”, Kimtrell exclaimed, looking at a used condom in the trash. Renee, now aware of what she was referring to, rolled her eyes. “You slept with that guy last night?” Renee shrugged her shoulders, said “yeah” and rushed back into her room, leaving Kimtrell stunned. ‘What has gotten into Renee,’ Kimtrell wondered. Renee was convinced Kimtrell was so self-absorbed that she could care less about what was going on with her. She grabbed her purse and left for class feeling alone, leaving Kimtrell confused and appropriately worried. Both girls wondered where their best friend was.

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.” 1 Peter 5:8

Renee now felt a kind of rebellion that she had never known before. She stopped going to lectures and now showed up only for the mid-terms and final exams for all of her classes. She started to call off sick from her retail job because she just didn’t feel like getting up some days. And Renee began to accept the silence between herself and Kimtrell. After all, she had more pressing concerns, like which mini-skirt to wear for Albert. He called periodically after that fateful night and eventually insisted that he come over to help her get “comfortable” in her new apartment. He also insisted that she wear a very short skirt.

Albert’s hands were all over Renee as soon as she shut the door to her room. After lengthy kissing, Albert lay across the bed.

“Come here,” he ordered.

Renee, sitting at the edge of the bed, didn’t understand. ‘I’m already here,’ she thought. She didn’t say anything.

“Don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talkin’ about.”

“What?”, Renee laughed, lost. “What do you mean?”

“Girl, get up here!” Albert said, receiving another blank stare. “Come up here, on my face.”

Renee had no idea what he was talking about and her facial expression showed it.

“I wanna eat you out. Come up here and squat on my face.”

Renee let out a big laugh, completely taken aback. She had never heard of or saw that position, but by the end of the night, accompanied with sore thighs, it became the most exhilarating, most pleasurable thing she had ever experienced. The note she found the next morning on the front door from the leasing office proved it. It indicated several disturbance calls that were on the office voicemail, along with a reminder to keep the noise level to a minimum.

The next time Albert called, he had a different request. Apparently, his car wasn't running so good, but he was adamant about having to see Renee. Thus, she agreed to drive to his house and she was not to have any panties on. She drove from Long Beach to Inglewood and parked on a very dark street in front of his house. Albert, looking out of the window, came out to escort her inside. He sat on the couch beside her in the living room, which was illuminated by the low-volume television.

"I wore panties," Renee blurted. "But I still put on a short skirt," she said proudly.

Albert responded with a wide smile as he threw his arm around her shoulder, his hand grabbing her breast. His two fingers searched for her nipple as he kissed her. Then suddenly Albert slid down off the couch and was on his knees in front of her, trying to pry her legs open.

Renee gasped. "Isn't your mom home?"

"Yeah, but she's in the back, asleep. She not gonna come in here," Albert attempted to assure her.

Shaking her head, Renee refused. "I'm not doin' nothin' with you while your momma's here."

"I promise she won't hear; open up."

"No, I'm serious."

Albert sat back on the couch. "Well, come on we can go to my homeboy's house then."

So Renee chauffeured Albert to his friend's house; he wasn't home. Determined, Albert said, "I know of another place."

"Where?"

"I know this spot where my cousin be at making his money. It's not far."

"Where, though?", Renee asked.

"Chill, I'll show you, it's just off the 90 a few exits." Albert was being vague as he squeezed Renee's thigh and proceeded to stuff his fingers inside of her while she drove. Feeling so good, she followed his directions through one street after another; each one getting darker and deeper into the hood. Finally, on his command, she turned into a seedy motel and remained in the car while he negotiated borrowing his cousin's "office" for a bit. Sitting under a flashing red "Open" sign, Renee got the green light from Albert to get out of the car. Although she couldn't see many people, she felt like there were plenty of eyes on her. She moved quicker and entered the room just as a man who was shoving something in his pocket was coming out. He nodded his head to Albert and left the two of them in the room. Albert peeked in the bathroom and then moved the curtain ever so slightly to peer out of the window. Renee stood near the door frozen. She was in an empty room with nothing but a large, red, heart-shaped bed. She could not take her eyes off of the bed. Suddenly, she said "no, I don't wanna be in here." Albert was

uncomfortable and promptly agreed with her. They rode back to his house joking about how loud she was the last time he was at her apartment. Renee dropped him off at the curb and sped home.

Renee's home life was still deplorable for her. She and Kimtrell were still barely speaking to one another, and when they did communicate it was by way of a snide remark, a roll of the eyes or slamming of a door. Renee hated being at home. Her life was nothing like she thought it would be; everything was out of control, and she didn't know how to fix it. Having lost her best friend and her identity, Renee just wanted to be happy. She was unaware of what actually mattered to her anymore. Renee wanted out. She was convinced that moving to a brand new place would change her entire life. She'd have a fresh and brand new start and she'd be happy. Her mind was made up and there was no stopping her. She wasted no time searching for a new apartment. She had to move quickly; she was suffocating in that place she called home. With no extra money, Renee needed a place with a move-in special, and she finally found one that did not require a deposit or down payment and even offered one hundred dollars off of the first month's rent. She was sold. The complex had security gates that opened with a remote control to reveal cascading water which flowed out of a gigantic sculpture. It was beautiful. Renee figured that she could just work overtime to pay the pricey rent, which amounted to more than the total of what she and Kimtrell currently paid for their apartment.

She brought up the subject of moving out the next time she saw Kimtrell and was so relieved when Kimtrell announced that she wanted to move out too. She wanted to move-in with her boyfriend. So on move-out day, after a despicable argument over which one got to keep the toaster that Kimtrell bought but with Renee's employee discount, the girls went their separate ways.

Renee was very happy that she had moved. Her girlfriends told her that her new place in Paramount was "flossy", and she had them over all the time, either for game night or just to chill. And a few times her guy friends joined them, accompanied with drinks. They would listen to music, play dominos and laugh all night long. Renee absolutely loved her new apartment. Each room was nicely decorated and very cozy. She bought Sears' top of the line bathroom rugs and accessories and pretty matching dishes with her employee discount for all of the dinner parties she dreamed of hosting there. And she needed that discount because she hadn't been working much lately. One of the two girls who worked in the housewares department with her got fired, and it wasn't much fun without her, so Renee told the manager that she was available less and less, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. And she most definitely did not ask for more hours; she had too much hanging out to do and that alone was a part-time job. After all, she and her friends spent at least a couple of hours doing each other's hair and makeup and swapping clothes - all this before they even decided where they were going. She didn't want to commit to working until, and she definitely did not want to have to be at work too early in the morning because she just never knew how a night out would unfold.

Like the night Renee and the girls ended up at Roscoe's Chicken and Waffles

after going to a club. When they arrived, it was bittersweet; there was a long, long line of folks waiting to get in, which was a good thing because that meant the party was still going, but Renee and her friends were hungry, and it was most definitely going to be a while before they would be seated to a plate of hot fried chicken and fluffy, syrupy waffles. The other downside was that it was chilly outside and the girls wouldn't dream of covering up their voluptuous assets with jackets while they stood in line.

After parking, Renee's excitement over the large crowd vanished as she thought of her already aching feet having to endure a high-heel, three block trek in the cold.

"You guys sure you wanna go? It's like 60 degrees out there. It's freezing!", Renee said attempting to be persuasive.

"Uh," Nia sarcastically pretended to contemplate Renee's question. "Hell,yeah girl! You see all them freaks out there? I saw a gang of fine ones."

Renee looked at Kenya.

Kenya added, "It's up to ya'll. I don't care."

"Well, I wanna go. I'm starving and it's packed!" Kenya's friend, Latoya, said excitedly.

"But if you're hungry, then you know you not gonna eat for a good little minute, right? It's a gang of people out there, and we can go swoop by Rally's or Winchell's." Renee was still trying.

Noticing her friend's hungry face, for both food and a man, Kenya said, "How 'bout we just go and see how long the wait is: then we can decide."

Renee was out voted. She took off her seatbelt and reluctantly put her heels back on. She locked the car and began the frigid journey to the back of a long, slow-moving line. The girls huddled together and looked like a pack of penguins for the first two blocks, but as they neared the restaurant, they broke away, stood up straight and did their best to put on the facade that they weren't the least bit cold. They finally made it to the rear of the line, right behind a group of three guys who didn't catch the girls' attention because neither of them was particularly attractive, but they weren't horrid either. Renee and her friends were not trying to impress the guys in front of them; in fact, after a quick, incognito glance as they passed them, the girls almost forgot that the guys were there, so much so that they made no pretense that they were freezing and didn't think twice about commenting on how flossy the cars that cruised by were. Latoya even announced that just looking at a "dude's fly whip" could almost give her an orgasm. At this, the girls hollered and wiped the tears from their eyes from laughing so hard.

All three of the guys had been listening and silently commenting on how funny and crazy the girls behind them were. And after nearly an hour of waiting in line, it was their boisterous laughter that prompted the biggest guy to turn around and speak.

Laughing, he said, "Did I hear you right?"

The unexpected attention created some embarrassment for the girls, which only caused them to break out into even more violent hooting and shouting. The guys couldn't help themselves, and soon they were all doubled over with laughter.

"Damn, I need to get rid of my hoopty then if it's all like that!", the shortest one proclaimed.

"Man, me too!", the tall, skinny one said, admiring Renee's smile.

They were all entertaining each other so that they did not realize another thirty minutes had raced by. Everyone was colder and hungrier than ever. "Ray-Ray," the short one, suggested that they all go to Rally's instead. But Michael, the tall, skinny one had a better idea. Hoping to prolong the night and impress Renee, Michael sought to entice the girls by offering, "Man, ain't no place gonna be better than my kitchen." Seeing their skeptical expressions and following Michael's lead, "Big Man," the big one, cosigned the idea and assured the girls that there was no better cook than his boy "Chef Michael." The girls clustered together to decide if they were going to take them up on their offer. When Renee and her friends quickly emerged from their huddle in agreement, the guys were beaming, feeling extremely victorious.

As they followed the guys' used sedan to Michael's and Ray-Ray's place, they reasoned that the guys were harmless and that if anything went down they'd overpower them because the guys were outnumbered. The caravan drove through dark, rundown streets filled with abandoned houses, stray dogs and old, chewed up Puma sneakers hanging from the power lines didn't even remotely faze Renee and her friends. They even joked about not suspecting that these guys lived in the hood part of the hood and were immediately vindicated when they parked in front of a quaint little duplex on a quiet, South Central Los Angeles street with well-manicured lawns. Once inside the small, two bedroom rental, they all voted on what "Chef Michael" would prepare and settled on his famous "Big Ass Chicken Burritos" with the anticipation of satisfying their ravenous hunger. The girls watched as the guys pulled out their wallets to pitch in on the necessary groceries. They enjoyed the unspoken expectation that they were not required to contribute. Michael asked Renee if she would go with him to the market down the street. Renee told Kenya to go with her and the trio piled into her car and stopped at the only place open at that hour, Mercado.

Renee watched unconvincingly as Michael shopped the aisles for non-brand named, Spanish-labeled ingredients. Michael went all out and bought enough food to feed a small village. They each carried a brown paper bag out to the empty, dark parking lot and headed back to their friends. They all clowned around as they watched Michael create a feast for them. And a little after 3 a.m. he served up his delicious, juicy, overly stuffed "Big Ass Chicken Burritos." They were seasoned to perfection and too humongous to devour, but they all found a way.

"Mmm, mmm, mmm. You really put yo' foot in this!", Kenya exclaimed.

"He what?", Nia laughed as she continued to overtly flirt even though she had zero interest in any of the guys.

Immediately, Kenya was annoyed with Nia, who she thought was always trying to behave so high class.

“Well, thank you, thank you. I try,” Michael smiled, feeling quite accomplished.

Biting the bait, Big Man said, “Put his foot in it, you know, did the damn thing!”

“I don’t get it,” Nia purred.

Kenya shook her head in disgust.

Intrigued by her naivety, Ray-Ray explained, “It just means that he really showed out with his cookin’ tonight, you know, did his extra best for us.”

“Ooh, I get it! He sure did!”, Nia said excitedly as she stared at Michael, smiling.

Everyone ate way more than they should have and became instantly exhausted. Big Man mustered up the strength to pronounce that he had to be at work in approximately two hours and said, “Eh, somebody gonna need to run me home real quick.” Ray-Ray knew Michael was already in love with Renee, so he volunteered to take his friend home. They started saying their individual “Good-byes” and “It was nice meeting you” and “We’ll have to do this again sometime.” When they finally left, the girls grudgingly started to put their shoes on and look for their purses. Latoya began to complain about having to drive home after getting her car, which was parked at Renee’s apartment. Renee offered to let her to spend the night at her place, but that didn’t stop her groaning. Michael went out on a limb and blurted, “Why don’t ya’ll stay here tonight? I’ve got extra blankets and pillows.” The girls, who were extremely tired and full, glanced at one another and were all very surprised and somewhat excited to read each other’s willing faces. Renee, the implied leader of the group, replied “Ok!” Thrilled, Michael eagerly retrieved blankets and pillows out of his bedroom closet.

“Where we gonna sleep?”, Latoya questioned.

“Well, I can make a pallet on the floor for ya’ll here,” Michael said, pointing the area of the floor at the foot of his bed. The girls were all fine with that until he told Renee that she could sleep in the bed with him. They all looked at each other and at Michael, half amused and half puzzled. But before their confusion turned into concern, Michael said in a serious manner, “Don’t worry, it’s not like that. I’m not tryna do anything. I just wanna keep you warm tonight.” Renee blushed. She sensed that he liked her but now he was being blunt and it shocked and pleased her all at once. Kenya and Latoya proceeded to smile and have some fun with Michael’s declaration.

“Well dang, I guess we’ll just lay down here like some dogs then!”, Latoya joked, laughing.

Michael shook his head, smiling, “Nah, it’s not like that.”

“Hey, I ain’t mad at ya, Michael!”, Kenya said as she laughed and got comfortable on the floor.

Nia, on the other hand, was not the least bit amused. She could not believe her ears. It was acceptable to her for all of them to sleep on the floor, but she was flabbergasted when Renee was singled out to sleep in the bed. Knowing that there was no use in trying to persuade the girls to leave at this point, Nia announced that she couldn't possibly sleep on the hard floor. "I have cramps," she broadcasted. Her statement caught everyone off guard, particularly Michael. He didn't want to swap Renee for Nia. And Kenya grimaced; she just couldn't hide her disdain for Nia a moment longer. It was clearly visible that Nia was ill, but it wasn't due to cramps. Kenya and the other girls knew that she simply could not stomach that Renee got attention from a male over her. In Nia's mind she was the top diva of the group; no one could convince her that she was not model material, even though she was 5'4". She classified herself as the sexiest one out of the girls, so she was dumbfounded when Renee was chosen over her.

Michael came up with a solution that was suitable for Nia. He suggested that she sleep in Ray-Ray's bed, which she agreed to do only on the condition that he put down fresh linen for her. Michael was all too happy to oblige. With Nia satisfied, he went back into his bedroom and stood motionless for a moment to take in the lovely sight. Not one, not two, but three pretty girls in short skirts were lying around his room. Renee's voice jolted him back into reality and he asked, "What did you say?"

"I was saying that my feet are so cold."

"Oh!", Michael yelled out energetically. "I have a brand new pack of socks that I just bought from J.C. Penny's in my trunk! I'll run out and get 'em." After he sprinted out, the girls snickered at his eagerness to please Renee and shook their heads in annoyance over Nia's behavior. Suddenly, Michael returned and passed out the whitest socks ever to each of them. They thanked him and he turned off the light and got into the bed. Renee was not attracted to him and she was going through the motions of being the object of his affection mainly because of her friends' encouragement and for their entertainment. She let him put his arm around her but he didn't dare spoon her. Before long all the girls were asleep, but Michael was wide awake. As soon as he heard the front door open, he jumped up to warn Ray-Ray.

"Eh man, that little one is in your bed."

"Man, what!?" Ray-Ray asked, intrigued. He was surprised when he noticed that the girls' car was still parked out front. He and his friends had never come across such spontaneous girls before, and Michael had never been so bold either. Ray-Ray was wide-eyed, eager to find out what was going to happen next. Michael motioned for Ray-Ray to calm down and quietly told him that Renee was in his bed and that the other girls were sleeping on the floor. Ray-Ray smiled at his friend proudly.

"So wad up wit...?", Ray-Ray softly asked as he nodded his head towards his bedroom.

"Nah, man. It ain't like that. She said she couldn't sleep on the floor because she got cramps."

“Aw damn! So you just put the bleeding chick in my bed.” Ray-Ray laughed as he shook his head. “It’s cool,” he said as he walked to the couch and lay down. Michael smiled and got back in his bed. When the birds could be heard chirping, the girls awoke and started putting on their shoes. Each one looked like crap and wanted to hurry up and get home so that they could get back into their own beds. The guys walked them to Renee’s car, and they all said “Good-bye” and thanked Michael for his food and their new socks. Michael and Renee exchanged pager numbers and the girls headed home. They laughed and talked about their crazy, fun night and Nia asked Renee if she had given Michael the right number, to which Renee laughed and replied, “Of course not!”

Two nights later, Renee and Nia met at Kenya’s house to head over to a club to see Crucial Conflict perform. Five girls were packed inside of Kenya’s very compact car. By the time they arrived at the club, all of them reeked of smoke from the marijuana that Kenya’s two friends were enjoying. And even though they looked no different than all of the other girls with glossy lips, belly-button exposing tops, short skirts, Vaseline covered legs, and high-heels, they felt like superstars from all the gawking and arm pulling they received from countless guys as they walked through the crowd inside the club. They were laughing, flirting, dancing and having the time of their lives.

As was to be expected, Nia was getting a lot of extra love for her form fitting tube top and hip-hugging handkerchief-sized skirt. One guy, about 6 feet tall with an average build and nice haircut, was extremely drunk and used all of his liquid courage to step to her. But after glancing at his inexpensive shoes and smelling his alarming breath, Nia scrunched up her face and rolled her eyes at him for having the audacity to even think that he had a remote chance with her. Of course her behavior enraged him, and he commenced to cursing at her, calling her “no-hair having, too skinny anyway” self all sorts of awful names. This caused Nia to be furious and appalled, and she screeched out all the curse words and insults that she knew. Renee tried to calm her down and pull her away from the guy, but Nia wouldn’t stop, and neither did he. She soon gave up. But the club was beyond packed and in definite violation of all fire safety codes, and as a result of all the pushing, shoving and dancing, Renee found herself huddled between the two opponents. All of a sudden her leg jerked up and karate kicked the guy in his stomach as a reflex from feeling his fist punch her nose. The next thing she knew her legs were dangling from the stronghold of a bouncer who had immediately swooped her up off the ground from behind. He carried her away from the dance floor and proceeded to yell at two strange girls, ordering them to take her into the ladies room and help clean up her bloody nose. Being curious, the girls did as they were told and ushered Renee into the restroom, questioning her while handing her tissue. Renee was shocked and upset, and she didn’t know the girls. She took the tissue from them without saying a word. Finally, Nia burst in exclaiming, “Oh my gosh Renee! Your nose! Oh my gosh! I was looking everywhere for you!” Renee, visibly ticked off, just stared at Nia. “We’ve got to get out of here, Renee; they’re shutting it down!” Nia yelled, not able to apologize to Renee.

It took what seemed like forever for Renee and Nia to find Kenya and her friends. The parking lot and the streets nearest the club were at a standstill. The people from the club and those who only came to “parking lot pimp” were all intermingling. The outside gathering was livelier than inside the club, for the girls got to feast their eyes not only on fresh meat but their fly rides as well, not knowing that most were weekend rentals to

attract girls like them.

After Kenya pulled Renee aside to talk to her and console her for being assaulted in the club, all the girls packed themselves back into the car, rolled the windows down, and enjoyed the view in the purposely unhurried traffic. Each car had music blasting either 2Pac or Biggie Smalls. And people were yelling out their name and number to the cute guy or girl in the slow-moving passing car. Renee talked and laughed from the passenger seat as the car inched down the street when all of a sudden her door was opened by none other than Albert. He was drunk and with three guys she didn't know. He was being loud and boisterous as he attempted to grab her out of her seat. Stunned and entangled in her seatbelt, Renee freed herself and finally allowed him to pull her out, leaving her friends smiling and laughing harder, not knowing who he was. Kenya continued to crawl down the street with the door flung wide open as Albert hung all over Renee, kissing her neck while his friends belted out approval noises. Renee was turned off by Albert after the motel incident, and she just felt confused and icky around him. She pulled away from him and got back into the car and instructed Kenya to drive off. Kenya could see that Renee was uncomfortable, so she maneuvered away from the curb into the other lane. Renee just stared out of the window, now ready to go home.

"Whose turn is it to drive tomorrow night?", Renee said with a smirk as Kenya pulled up in front of her apartment.

"Yours!", they girls yelled, laughing and knowing she knew good and well whose turn it was.

Renee laughed, "Alright, alright. Fine, I'll drive."

Kenya smiled and said, "Oh we know you will."

Exhausted in every possible way, Renee plopped on her bed and quickly fell asleep - clothes, shoes and all.

The many intervals of consecutive nights of partying were beginning to take their toll on Renee. She was not working enough hours to pay her rent. She was barely able to pay the second month's rent by returning all of the houseware items she bought, including the new bathroom towels, rugs and toothbrush holder. She used a towel as a rug instead and a regular drinking cup for her toothbrush. Impressing her friends was fun while it lasted. With no money and no means to pay her third month's rent, Renee was depressed yet again. She couldn't ask her family for help because she knew that they had their own money problems. She had only had two weeks before the rent was due, and she only had half the money and all she could do was worry. She was too depressed to go to work and felt that it was not going to matter anyway because she wouldn't get her check in time. Renee began to pass up opportunities to hang out with the girls because she had no extra money and she was too bummed. The more obsessed she became over how to come up with rent money, the more depressed she became.

Then a couple of days later, while lying on her couch in the dark, mindlessly watching Ricki Lake, an idea came to her. She would get up and immediately go out and secure another apartment before an eviction showed up on her credit report. So Renee

determined to get herself out of the mess she had created, jumped up, and got dressed to start her new apartment search. The next week she signed a new lease agreement on a nice second-level apartment in Bellflower with a view of the boulevard and a move-in special. There was no down payment or deposit required, and the first month's rent was only \$29.99.

Renee was relieved and resentful. She felt empowered that she could depend on herself, but she felt as though she should have been able to ask her family, but not one of them could help her financially. And her friends had let her down most of all. They knew that she wasn't going out anymore, and they even knew that she didn't know how she was going to pay her rent but they didn't care; they got to go back home to their parent's house or at least get money from them. Renee convinced herself that if she wasn't driving the gang around or bringing them fliers she got from campus advertising all the hot spots to party or being the life of the party as she was expected to be, then they were nowhere to be found.

Renee's older neighbor and his brothers moved her into her new apartment on the 1st and she slid a note under the door of the leasing office that night stating that she had moved out. She knew that she would be billed for breaking her lease and that it would go on her credit report because she couldn't pay the fees, but at least she was able to get a new place before that happened, she reasoned.

A week after living in her third apartment in two years, Renee found herself on her same old, raggedy couch watching Ricki, Jerry and Maury. Lonely and bored, she was beginning to wonder what the purpose to anything was. She lived in a different place, but still felt that she had the same fruitless life. She hadn't worked at Sears in two weeks. She called a few times to see when she was supposed to report to work but eventually realized that her manager had given up on her and stopped putting her on the schedule altogether.

With no job and no money, Renee was more depressed than ever. She couldn't afford much of anything, let alone cable or a telephone. Luckily, there was a payphone across the street in front of the liquor store that she could see from her window. One evening she looked out and saw that no one was on it, so she slid her feet into her flip flops and headed out of the door in the tank top and sweatpants that she had been in for three days. When she got across the boulevard, she saw that a guy had beaten her to the phone. She waited patiently because she had nothing else to do and because she planned on hogging it when it was her turn. Renee watched as the guy whispered into the phone while sending a page. Then he pulled out another pager from his pocket and stopped it from beeping. Renee, who wasn't paying much attention to him before she noticed the second pager, became curious. She wondered why he had two pagers and she continued to observe his multi-tasking. He was attractive in the way that one's own brother is attractive. He was about 5'8", with brown skin and an average build, and wore a white T-shirt, cut-off Khaki's, white socks and black flip flops. His thug uniform did not correlate with his gentle demeanor.

Suddenly, he hung up the phone but he didn't move away from it. Seconds later, after shoving both pagers back into his pockets, he looked right at Renee and felt compelled to tell her that he would be just a few minutes longer.

"I'm just waiting for a callback. I'll be real quick. They about to call right now," he explained.

Nodding, Renee said, "Oh ok, no problem."

Renee felt like she had hit the jackpot the first time she paged her mom to the payphone number and it rang. She knew that only certain payphones would process an incoming call and was all too excited to find out that that lone one across the street was one of them. Calling Alabama took way too many quarters than she had, but because of her lucky payphone, she talked to her mother and sister at least every other day.

"All right," the unsuspecting thug guy said after he finished his phone call.

Fearing that she had been caught staring, Renee was startled when he spoke to her, so she rushed towards the phone, bumped into his shoulder, and dropped all of her change.

"Whoa! You all right?"

"Yeah," Renee said, embarrassed as she stooped down to retrieve her money.

"Here, let me help you."

"Thank you.", she said as she took her change.

"I've been seeing you on my phone a lot lately."

Laughing, Renee asked, "Your phone?"

"Yeah," he said laughing with her.

"Oh wow; well may I?", Renee questioned as she pointed to the phone.

"Yeah, go ahead." he said, smiling.

Renee put her hand over her heart, smiled and sarcastically said, "Thanks for sharing."

The guy shook his head, laughed and then looked at his pager. Without looking up at her, he said, "you just move in across the street?"

"Yeah, not too long ago."

"Where you stay? In the front?"

"Yeah. I'm in the one right there on the end," Renee said pointing to her upstairs unit.

"Yeah, I figured you had to be in the front cause me and my girl stay in the back, and I don't ever see you back there."

Suddenly, a blue drop top Cadillac bounced by on hydraulics, blasting Dr. Dre. The driver yelled out, "Wad up, Booger!", and quickly disappeared.

The payphone guy threw his hands up and smiled.

"Did he say "Booger?" They call you "Booger?", Renee asked, looking disgusted.

Laughing, he answered, “Girl, ain’t nobody say ‘Booger.’ He said ‘Bullet’. They call me Bullet.”

Renee pretended to look scared and said, “Well, let me not ask why they call you that.”

“Nah, I was shot when I was thirteen, so the name just stuck like this bullet in my neck.”

“Wow, so it’s still in there?”

Bullet laughed and nodded, “Yup, they can’t move it so it’s here to stay.”

“Wow,” was all Renee could muster up.

Just then a yellow cab pulled up and Bullet said, “That’s me. Gotta get this money.”

“All right.” Renee said as she watched him get into the cab.

“I’ll see you,” Bullet said before he closed the door and took off.

Renee proceeded to call her mother and listen to her complain about her younger brother’s private school tuition increasing. Next, Renee assured her mother that she was getting along fine and that she would be getting her financial aid check soon. Renee left out that she had been denied unemployment benefits and that she was living off of money she got from returning just about everything she owned: clothes, shoes, sheets. Additionally, Renee declined to tell her mother that she fed herself by lying. She would drive through a fast food drive-thru, ideally one with multiple cars, and pull up and tell the cashier that he/she forgot to put her fries in the bag. Renee would oftentimes buy a Whooper and then go back through and tell her lie. She had done it so much, at so many food establishments, that she began to completely assume the role and would become truly irate if they questioned her. She considered herself lucky when she would not only leave with fries but with either a free drink or sometimes even with a coupon for a free meal on her next visit.

Sometime later, Renee’s financial aid check arrived. Not only did she finally have some cash, but her newfound friend Bullet “put her up on game” and told her how to get approved for food stamps by faking that she couldn’t work a full-time job due to lower back problems. Renee was now a first and fifteenth girl and could buy gas and food. She eased off of stealing food from the fast food restaurants as she suspected that they finally had caught on to her. Besides, she was now able to walk into a market and fill up her basket with enough food to last her a full month.

Renee spent her days watching daytime TV. She went to school only for mid-terms and final examinations. She would cram to do well enough to stay eligible for financial aid. Renee spent her afternoons and evenings on the front stoop of her apartment complex with Bullet. They would laugh and joke for a while until he caught a cab somewhere as soon as the sun set, and he wouldn’t return until dawn. Sometimes Renee would see him come back out to put his girl in a cab and pay for her to get to her day job. She was a short, plump, light-skinned, very quiet girl. She smiled but she never spoke. Renee never felt like Bullet’s girlfriend had an issue with them sitting around out front all day. She and Bullet were just fast friends. He would sometimes go down the street to the burger joint and bring her back a burger meal or buy her favorites, Pepsi,

Doritos and Hostess Ding Dongs, from the liquor store so that the two of them could snack while watching the boulevard all day.

Once in a while guys would come by the stoop and loiter with them. If more than one came by, then Renee usually didn't stay long before she excused herself to go back inside and watch the results of someone's paternity test on TV. However, when the tall, young, dark Ethiopian guy came by, Renee stayed. His name was Sam, and he had the smoothest deep brown skin and the softest, blackest wavy hair. He lived with his older brother and mother in a three bedroom condo a few blocks away. Renee was very attracted to him and a little intrigued by his ethnicity. Renee and Sam managed to flirt with one another when all three of them were laughing and talking. Bullet seemed amused by the flirting they tried to suppress in front of him. A few times Sam came with his brother and, when he did, Renee would leave. She didn't really like the way he stared at her. Once Sam told his brother that he thought Renee could pass for Ethiopian because of her reddish skin and dark black hair. His brother nodded with a sly smile, which made her feel objectified. Renee knew that she was better than her lifestyle, and she oftentimes felt like if she weren't living the way she was, she and Sam might actually have a chance of being a couple. But she felt less than him. She felt like he had to see her as a lowlife girl with no aspirations and no potential.

Renee knew that she wasn't a lowlife, and her friend, Kenya, knew it too. But Kenya did sense that Renee seemed a little down and out, and she thought that maybe some male attention would help her spirits. So she thought that she would introduce her to a guy she knew who was incarcerated and was looking for some female attention to uplift his spirits. So after much persuasion from her friend, a reluctant Renee went to the prison with Kenya and Latoya to meet "Baby Block." Baby Block was the 25-year-old cousin of Latoya's boyfriend, both of whom were locked up in the same facility. Baby Block needed a lady to come visit him and keep him going. Although Renee was attracted to him, she was nervous about his size. She had never been with a guy so big. He was muscular, not overweight. He was very light skinned with long, pretty hair that he kept braided in cornrows.

So Renee got a telephone installed, and he began to call her collect and send her cards in the mail, and it wasn't long before she was infatuated with his smooth sweet talk. The more they talked, the more she looked forward to his calls. She began to share more and tell him about her money problems and the bills that weren't getting paid and he would console her with promises that he would be home soon and take care of everything. He even offered to have his sister come bring her some money, but she declined. She felt bad that he was the one in prison but was encouraging her when she should have been encouraging him. But with her mounting bills, she just was not in the mood to be upbeat for him when she couldn't be that way for herself. Needless to say, it wasn't long before she was irritated by his calls, mainly because of the expense. All of his collect calls were adding up, and she was beyond frustrated because she knew he could not help her. She found herself apologizing to him more frequently for being short or not answering the phone, and she didn't like feeling bad. He had become just one more problem that she did not need. She had one last phone conversation with him, telling him that her phone was getting cut off and that they could just write to one another, which they did. Baby Block's letters were much more consistent and substantial than Renee's. She liked him, but felt like she ought to focus on surviving, and now that

her money was low again, the honeymoon was over for her. So when Baby Block told her that he was coming home sooner than she thought, but would not tell her when exactly, Renee freaked out. Kenya told her that usually dudes don't tell when they are getting out so that they can spy on the girl and see if she's got another man coming around and whatnot. Renee didn't like that idea at all. In fact, she did not want him to "come home" to her. He was fine to chat with on the phone when she had a phone and he made her feel good early on, but now things were different. She was overwhelmed with her lack of finances and was depressed again. She didn't really know Baby Block, and she didn't want him to get out and think that he could just move in with her and that they'd live happily ever after.

Renee's only course of action was to move...again. She couldn't take it anymore. She decided to chase happiness by running away, literally. This time she decided that it would be best to move further away. She just wanted to get away from her friends and from familiar neighborhoods, and most importantly she just didn't want Baby Block to be able to find her. So she found a quaint upstairs apartment in Inglewood and told Kenya not to tell Baby Block where she moved to.

With everything packed and a final burger session on the front stoop, Bullet told Sam and Renee goodbye: Sam for the night, Renee for forever. She was already packed up and ready for Kenya's boyfriend and his friends to come by the next morning to move her furniture. After Bullet rode off in a cab, Sam, knowing tonight was Renee's last night in her apartment, asked to follow her upstairs. 'He's cute,' she thought, and said yes. Once the laughing, grinning, playful hitting and tickling commenced, Sam kissed her. Then he touched her, and Renee didn't stop him. She knew she'd never see him again and figured she had nothing to lose; besides, she was attracted to him. So sex ensued. But then Sam decided to treat her like a raggedy woman on food stamps with no job, no money, who accepted food from a drug dealer, and attempted to enter her anally. Renee, suddenly feeling pain, broke away from him quickly with a disgusted frown on her face. "Get out," she said.

"What?"

"I don't know what made you think I'd be down for that. I mean I know you think I'm a chicken-head, but I'm not."

"Come on, Renee. I don't think that. It's fine. I don't have to get it from the back. Come here," Sam pleaded, flirtatiously.

Shaking her head, Renee pulled her sweatpants back on. "No, no. I gotta go to sleep. I have to get up early in the morning."

Sam looked defeated. "All right, all right. I'm going," he said as he got dressed.

Renee sat on the arm of the couch closest to the door as she waited for him to leave.

He grabbed his keys off the floor and leaned down to kiss her on the cheek. "Be good," he said with a smile and walked out the door.

Renee sat in a worn burgundy leather chair, staring at a magazine advertisement, not realizing that she hadn't flipped the page for twenty minutes. She just couldn't focus on anything other than being pathetic. "What in the world have I become," she thought. She never thought she'd be that girl who needed to go to a community clinic to be tested for an STD. She used to think that she was better than that. Nevertheless, the nervous twenty-year-old found herself sitting in the clinic's waiting room, mentally scolding herself and praying for the first time in a very long time. Soon a nurse yelled out, "Ms. Lavender!", and broke Renee's hypnotic state. Renee followed the nurse into a small room and awaited the doctor's arrival. After some time the doctor walked into the freezing room. 'Great,' thought Renee, irritated. A woman about her mother's age holding a manila folder stood before her. Not just any woman, a black woman.

"Hello there, I'm Dr. Robinson." Embarrassed, Renee introduced herself. "Okay, so it says here that you've been having an itching sensation in your vagina, is that correct?" Humiliated, Renee mumbled "yes."

"And how long has this been going on?"

"Since yesterday."

"Are you pregnant?"

"No!", Renee exclaimed, offended.

"Renee?", Dr. Robinson studied the young girl, who looked to be about her niece's age. They both had the same complexion, beautiful brown sun-kissed skin, and were not overweight but not terribly skinny. "Renee?", Dr. Robinson repeated, waiting for her to make eye contact.

Finally Renee looked at her, feeling ashamed.

"Look, I am going to have to ask you a few questions. Then we'll run a few tests and get you out of here, okay?"

Clearing her throat, Renee forced an "okay."

"Are you sexually active?"

"Yes."

"Have you had anal sex?"

Renee's mouth dropped open as she stared at Dr. Robinson, dumbfounded. What in the world does that have to do with a single thing? Some nerve, she thought. All she could do was roll her eyes and look away. Sensing her growing discomfort, Dr. Robinson explained, "If you are going to engage in anal sex, it is important to know that the rectum contains infection-causing bacteria; anything, anything at all such as fingers, objects, obviously a penis," Dr. Robinson smiled, "anything that has had contact with the anus should not subsequently be in contact with the vagina or mouth until it has been washed thoroughly because, as I stated, you would be more susceptible to infection."

Renee, mortified, thought it best to nod. Just then there was a knock at the door, then a whisper or two between the doctor and a younger woman dressed in floral scrubs.

"Sorry about that. Okay, Renee, do you have any questions so far?"

"No, I just want to know if I have a STD."

"Well, we will find out soon enough. We got a urine sample from you and now I will just need to do a pelvic examination. Have you noticed any discharge?"

"Yes."

"Okay, well I'm going to need you to just lie back and put your feet up in these stirrups here." Renee lay down and tried to be calm while a stranger's hand fumbled around inside her. And after what seemed like forever, she was instructed to sit up. The doctor told her that she was going to send the discharge that she had collected to the lab and that it was probably just a yeast infection that could be cleared up with a cream that would be applied directly into the vagina. "However", Dr. Robinson continued, "it could also be, and that is not the outcome we want. There are brochures about Chlamydia and other common sexually transmitted diseases up front. So put your clothes back on, take this form to the front desk, and check back with us tomorrow for the results. Just call the number on the top there, okay? It was nice meeting you, Renee. Oh, and feel free to take some of the condoms here." Dr. Robinson tapped on a huge glass jar on the table with her pen, and just like that she was gone.

Driving, driving. She just kept driving, not paying attention to where she was going, for she had driven down this freeway towards her latest apartment countless times. It was habit, as was her choice of music at times like this. Gansta rap to match her gansta lean as she mashed 80 miles per hour until she reached her exit. Thank God she knew her way because she could barely see for all the tears that clouded her vision. Feeling lost and unsure and scared, she cried out to the top of her lungs over the bass, "Oh God! Please Lord, please let me be okay. Please, please Father. I can't be sick, Lord, please!" She came to a stoplight and waited. She waited not only for the light to turn green but for the truck next to her to drive away because the truck driver would be able to see down inside her car, and she just couldn't do it with someone watching. When the coast was clear, she vigorously scratched her pubic area. The itching sensation was volcanic, and Renee simply could not endure another second of it. She parked the car and walked upstairs to her new Inglewood apartment, where she'd been living for a couple of weeks. While reaching for the door knob, Renee dropped her keys, which only escalated her despair. She bent to retrieve her keys while she prayed, "Lord, I beg of you. I promise from this day forward I will never sleep around again if you would please make it so that I don't have some disease." Stressed, Renee walked straight through her dark apartment to her bedroom. She freed her long hair from a messy ponytail, rubbed her big, sad, red eyes, and lay down on the mattress in the middle of her bedroom floor. But she couldn't sleep. She worried about what the outcome of the STD test she had just taken would be. "I promise to be myself again," she bargained with God as she wiped her face with her sleeve. "And Father, please let the next guy I sleep with be someone that I love and who loves me like I love him." Overwhelmed by the very real possibility that she might have contracted some horrible disease, Renee cried herself to sleep, dreading the test results

that just might turn her world upside down. However, the next morning Renee went to the clinic and, to her chagrin, she was told that she had a yeast infection. Although the news was pitiful, she was tremendously grateful to God that it was only a yeast infection that would be cleared up in a few days. Harmless as it was, Renee felt guilty for having it in the first place.

“He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” John 15:2

Renee found a job at a local electronics store a few weeks after settling into her new place. She loved the apartment for different reasons than she loved her previous ones. This time Renee loved the quietness of the place. The neighbors seemed to be a bit older than her, and they were not loud, and there was no front stoop for folks to loiter around. They didn't blast music or slam doors. It was just peaceful. Furthermore, she didn't have a nice drug dealer yelling up at her window or friends stopping by at all times of the day and night. It was just her place. And she anticipated all the ways she would decorate it once her next financial aid check came. She had big ideas thanks to the many decorating television shows that she traded all the daytime trash talk shows for.

She also looked forward to being able to keep telephone and cable service on this time around now that she had a job she enjoyed. She was a cashier at a hip store with lots of employees near her age and a constant stream of cute male customers there to buy the latest music. The job had its disadvantage, however - one being that she was no longer eligible for food stamps given her income. So Renee survived on tea and toast for breakfast and Top Ramen noodles for lunch and dinner. But she now felt glad to be able to eat without government assistance or theft. She had a new sense of pride and began styling her hair, wearing lip gloss, and ironing her uniform for work. She felt good. She was friendly with the other female cashiers and found a lot of pleasure flirting with an older coworker who looked like he definitely might have done time. He was attractive, though in that older man sort of way: cute enough to flirt with but too intimidating and experienced to actually follow anything through with.

Renee's life was now pretty calm and methodical, and she liked it, but one night something different occurred. Her shift was almost over; she had only about two more hours to go and was feeling a little lazy and ready to go home. It was slow. The store was going to close soon, and there were hardly any customers. And Renee was tired of pretending to be busy straightening up electronic warranties and brochures and adjusting the receipt paper on the cash register. So she decided to take her last break, which she really never did because there was always either a steady flow of customers or someone she liked working her same shift to talk and pass the time with. But not this particular night; instead old lady Lucille was working with her - the lady who did nothing but ask the same questions about the simplest stuff, which drove Renee nuts. So, since pretending to be busy never stopped Lucille from asking annoying questions, Renee decided to disappear.

Renee walked to the back of the empty, quiet store and opened the door to the break room, expecting to space out and relax for a bit. But she never could have guessed who would be on the other side of the door. Her heart seemed to stop, her big eyes got bigger, and a rush sped through her body. There he was. The absolutely most beautiful

man she had ever seen or imagined, sitting there alone, with his beautiful brown eyes fixated on the television. He took her breath away. After a moment, Renee quickly closed her mouth, which had fallen open in utter amazement, and mustered up the strength to walk past him to the other table. He looked up as she entered and kept his gaze on her as she walked by with her head down.

She sat there for what seemed like forever, staring at him while he watched TV. Suddenly, he got up and retrieved a bottled water from the refrigerator, then sat back down. Renee studied his movements and took in all the loveliness of the 6'4", bald-headed, light-skinned black man with broad shoulders, big hands, nice round, tight butt and flat stomach. His body was perfection, with just the right amount of muscles. His walk was very sexy. Although he was clearly about her age, he had a very manly, wise look about him. He sat there unmoved throughout Renee's entire fifteen minute break. She wondered why he hadn't left, and she imagined him to be a rebel not confined by rules since he was in there before she arrived and he didn't look like he planned on leaving anytime soon. Renee, excited and embarrassed that she would have to pass him to leave the room, yearned for him to say something to her. Just before opening the door, she blurted, "Do you have the time?" He looked down at his big shiny watch and said with a deep, alluring voice, "8:15." His brown eyes were mesmerizing.

"Thank you", she replied very cool as if his beauty didn't faze her and left.

She spent the rest of her shift thinking about him and wondering why she was just now aware of his existence. Her interest was piqued. She drove home that night, hoping that she'd see him again the following day. The next morning she danced excitedly while she primed her hair and sprayed on perfume that she had received for Christmas two years ago from her mom. It was all in vain, however, because "Sexy Man" did not work that afternoon.

The days went on, and occasionally she would see him in passing and notice his handsome glance in her direction, but he was not overtly flirtatious. And after seeing him talk to a couple of the other cashier girls, Renee decided to forget about him because he was just too cute and she was sure that every female employee and customer alike wanted him. Getting all caught up in him, she thought, would be a colossal waste of her time.

But days later, as she was coming out of the restroom at work, Renee came extremely close to literally bumping right into "Sexy Man" himself. He looked down at her with a serious face, arms wide open as if to try to catch her, and said in an almost whisper, "I wanted to just grab you and hold you and never let you go." Renee, confused and moved by what he had just said, gave him a fake smile and excused herself. She didn't know what to think. 'That couldn't be real. He doesn't even know me!', she rationalized.

"Hey! Wait a minute!", she heard him say. Renee turned around and thought it best not to even question what he said; after all, it had to simply be the world's most terrific pick up line.

"What's your name?"

Renee pointed to the name badge on her shirt, causing a smile, which would have made anyone forgive him anything, to blossom across his face. His name was Shawn,

and he looked straight into her eyes, given her his full, undivided attention. They exchanged numbers, and she walked away feeling like she was the only woman he desired.

Renee and Shawn got better acquainted over the phone for the next few days, and then one Friday night he stopped by her place. Renee was so anxious to see him outside of work. Her apartment was spotless and scented with candles, and she was squeaky clean and fragrant. He walked in, grinning and as tall as he wanted to be, and looked and smelled amazingly good. He was dressed to impress, and she was made giddy by the gesture. Yet there was more to Shawn than an attractive face and an outstanding body. He astounded Renee when he turned out to be useful too. While giving him a tour of her small apartment, he noticed her mattress on the floor and asked why the bed wasn't assembled. "Because I didn't have anyone to put it back together", she answered matter-of-factly and proceeded to watch as he immediately kneeled down in his trendy clothes and asked for the tools for the bed. A short time later he had both the mattress and Renee off the ground.

Later the two retreated to the living room, where he lay on the floor, amused by South Park, while Renee sat on the couch, longing to be in his arms. So she finally asked if he wouldn't mind if she lay next to him. "No", he replied. 'No?', she thought, "that's all he has to say? I shouldn't have even had to ask; he should have made the first move.' Just then her thoughts changed into anxiety as she desperately tried to suck in her stomach when Shawn placed his big, manly hand on it. His massive, strong hand would have allowed his fingers to touch her elsewhere, but he didn't. He kept it placed right on her stomach, almost as if it were frozen there, making her feel so petite and protected. Suddenly Renee was completely in love and told Shawn that since it was so late, he was welcome to stay the night. He said okay and asked for a blanket for the couch. Renee insisted it was too cold and that he could sleep in the bed with her. So Renee laid there with her head on his chest and Shawn holding her close, and she felt as light as air and as happy as she could ever remember being. They talked a bit about work and then progressed into more personal subjects like family, until the topic of sex came up. Shawn told Renee that he had not been with any girls at their job and assured her that he was single. Gradually, the conversation turned into Shawn telling Renee the story of his first sexual experience. He then asked about hers, and without thinking, she disclosed that it was forced on her, which shocked and touched Shawn. He rubbed her shoulder and listened, then softly offered that she would have to put that behind her to move forward.

The two lay there for what seemed like an eternity of bliss when Renee unexpectedly felt several soft, short kisses on her forehead. It was almost as if she were being brought back to reality with each kiss. She lifted her head and their lips touched for the first time. After much kissing and caressing, Shawn invited Renee to straddle him. She told him that she had never been in that position before, but he told her it was okay, so she went for it. He held her hips while she remained motionless. She could feel him under her through his pants. She leaned down and kissed his lips and his neck, and when she gently sucked on his earlobe Shawn moaned. His reaction pleased but surprised Renee because she had no idea what she was doing. When she lay back down beside him, he smiled and said, "So how'd you like it up there?" She smiled bashfully and nodded her approval. Then they fell asleep in each other's arms. The next morning Shawn asked her how they should interact now at work. Offended and assuming he

wanted her to keep their little rendezvous under wraps; Renee quickly snapped at him and assured him that she would not be acting any differently towards him and that they should not even let on that they even know each other. Shawn was taken aback but agreed.

Renee kept up her nonchalant attitude. The more Shawn attempted to show his feelings for her, the more unconcerned she acted. She didn't want to get hurt. She just wanted to love him, but she was too scared of being played by him. Their relationship graduated to include actual sex, which only propelled Renee to fall even more deeply in love. The more she loved him, the more worried she became. She wondered if he really felt the same way. Even though Shawn never disrespected Renee as far as other girls were concerned, she still questioned whether or not he was just playing her for a fool. Her skepticism was not only subconsciously protecting her heart, but it was sabotaging their relationship.

One night Shawn called Renee like he did every single night, and he playfully asked during a light-hearted conversation when she was going to buy him something. Immediately, Renee grew intense. She asked him to repeat himself, and he did, and that is when her inner volcano erupted. How dare he, she thought. His remark convinced her that he was used to girls buying him stuff, and that he expected her to act accordingly. She felt reduced to one of many. But mostly Renee was infuriated that he would ask her to buy him something when he lived at home while she struggled to stay on a budget to pay her bills on time. Shawn asked again, not sensing her mounting rage, and when he did Renee just exploded and slammed the phone down in his face.

Later that night, Renee calmed down and realized that Shawn had never disrespected her before, so it made no sense that he would start with that conversation. She reasoned that he was clueless and meant her no harm. She paged him, but he never returned her call. She tried desperately to apologize to him the next day, but he felt too disrespected and would not even look at her, let alone listen to her. Renee was sick about it. She felt so helpless. She started seeing him less and less at work. She figured that he was changing his hours to make sure they didn't work the same shift, but she was certain that she'd see him at some point. He couldn't avoid her forever, she thought. But after some time she still had not seen him. Terrified that he might not be working there at all anymore, she inquired about it and was told that he had taken a couple of weeks off due to personal family reasons. Believing that, Renee was concerned but too proud to call him. Instead, she convinced herself that she should actually be upset with him for not contacting her in his troubled time. After all, if he really loved her, he would have come to her so that she could comfort him.

As the weeks passed, Renee grew increasingly hurt. She was completely depressed. She stopped going to work and began to run out of money. She spent most of her days crying in bed. So when she totaled her car one rainy morning on her way to the market, Renee had reached her limit. She didn't have a tear left to cry. She felt trapped. She had no energy or desire to get up and get dressed. The cable was cut off, and the phone would soon be off as well. Moreover, the Top Ramen noodles weren't disappearing fast, but they were disappearing, and she wasn't going to get on a bus or make the long walk to the store for more.

One afternoon, while she lay on the living room floor with all the lights off, her mother called. By the end of the conversation, Renee had told her mother that she was

going to move to Alabama for a while and save a little money. Her mother told her that she was welcome there anytime. Thus, it was official. Renee was moving again. Her spirits picked up and she looked forward to going away and starting over again. She thought that brand new surroundings were exactly what she needed to forget about Shawn completely. So when her friends took her out for her 21st birthday, the celebration doubled as a farewell dinner. Renee was moving down south, far away from Shawn, who ignored and hurt her. 'This will do him good,' she thought. She knew that one day soon he would call or look for her and when he did, he'd get nothing but the dial tone and an empty apartment.

Months after moving to Alabama, and a few comical dates later, Renee was aching for Shawn. She was consumed with regret and, since she had ripped his number out of her phone book and couldn't remember it, she searched the internet but came up short. Defeated by her silly plan of revenge, she finally realized that she loved him. She turned to food for comfort, didn't date, and kept her appearance in a depressed state. However, due to her mother constantly nagging her to start working, she not only got a job but her own apartment as well. Renee worked as a reservationist for an airline and met some new friends. Feeling social again, she began to dress better and eat less. She also accepted a few disastrous dates - disastrous because none compared to Shawn.

It had been two years since Renee had moved to Alabama and she enrolled in a local college. This time around her motivation did not come from receiving financial aid. She figured that since she had started working towards her degree, she might as well finish. She had two more years left, and she was not enthusiastic about it - not until she took one of Dr. Kirseed's classes. He was not only a professor but the English department head, which would have been intimidating for Renee except for the fact that he was extremely down-to-earth and cool. For the first time Renee felt as though her ideas were worth sharing, and she felt as though she found her voice. She had taken many English courses at her previous college but none of them made her feel as though she was encouraged to participate in any discussions. She was very often the only black student in her English classes, and many times she did not know what the professor or students were talking about. It wasn't because they were talking another language or because Renee was stupid, but rather, more times than not, she was clueless about the metaphors or references in literature that the other students already seemed to know.

When Renee had first started leisurely reading as a young girl, she had devoured the Sweet Valley Twins and Babysitters Club series. But one day she ventured over to the African-American section of the bookstore. It was there that a then - thirteen-year-old Renee stumbled upon a small paperback entitled *Black Boy*. The title was enough to pique her interest, as her fondness for boys was increasing rapidly at this time. Renee bought the book, and her love for literature, particularly black literature, was born. Her appetite changed after that first Richard Wright book; she was no longer infatuated with Logan Bruno and started to become bored with the twins. Renee began to crave the gripping, well-written novels and short stories of Maya Angelou, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes. Her fascination with black literature expanded, and she immersed herself into anything written by a black author that she could get her hands on. Renee's curiosity grew as she started researching the Harlem Renaissance era. She could not get enough, because none of what she was being exposed to was made available to her in

school. Renee's English class experience in high school and her first two years of college were intimidating, for she did not know the references to mythology or religion. She was Catholic. She knew some stories, but no real study of symbolism or meaning was ever relayed to her. However, she wanted in. She was curious, and she wanted to know the hidden meanings and references included in the amazing literature. So she stuck with her English major at her new college, and a whole new world opened up to her in Dr. Kirseed's class. His class was inviting and enjoyable. Renee actually looked forward to being there. He introduced her class to African American authors and literature that she had not heard of, and allowed and encouraged everyone to voice their opinions. And once Renee started speaking and found the discourse to be engaging and inspiring, she was hooked. Thus, when she received her first college A, she gained a newfound determination and a bona fide goal. She was not only going to get her bachelor's, but she wanted to make the dean's list. And she did - not once, not twice, but every semester thereafter.

"He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' ... "Revelation 21:5

The move away from her California lifestyle proved to be good for Renee. In addition to excelling in school she still had her job with the airline and she enjoyed it. The perks were remarkable. She was privy to free flights and eventually learned how to examine the flight rosters in such a way that she could effectively predict which flights would have available first class seats. But Renee missed her friends, so when Kenya suggested she fly out to come to her Fourth of July barbeque, she did. As soon as Renee landed, Kenya took her to get an In & Out burger that she insisted she needed immediately. The next day at the barbeque Renee hung out with all of her friends and laughed and took pictures the whole afternoon. She watched Kenya bring her boyfriend, who was grilling burgers, some more sauce and couldn't help but think about Shawn. She wondered where he was and how he was doing. Two years had gone by and she still wondered about him. She felt guilty and knew that she would probably never find him as punishment for being too scared and naive not to realize she loved him until he was gone. Being back in California only compounded her near obsession with Shawn. Over the next two days Renee was in somewhat of a daze while hanging out with friends, because everywhere they went, she was constantly looking at every man to see if it was Shawn.

On the last day of the visit, Renee and her friends were in the mall, passing time, until Renee needed to be taken to the airport. She was walking along with Nia, who was telling her a long-winded story while trying to keep up with Kenya and Latoya; they were up ahead browsing at jewelry at a kiosk. Renee was listening inattentively. Then all of a sudden it seemed as though Nia's voice was fading away. Renee could still hear her talking as she stopped in her tracks and turned to face a store. She stood right there in the middle of the mall and was in total disbelief to see Shawn right before her eyes. He was inside of a candy store, standing head and shoulders above a group of guys. She was certain that she was seeing a mirage, until he walked out of the store and without saying a single word, wrapped his long, strong arms around her, burying his face in her neck. Renee was dumbfounded as she lifted her arms around his broad shoulders. There was no sound, no sight; in that moment there was nothing more than two beating hearts in all the world.

After a long embrace, Renee said, "I thought I'd never see you again."

"What have you been up to?", Shawn inquired.

Renee rambled on about how she was in school and how she had tried to find his number to call but was never successful. And Renee went on and on until Shawn stopped her mid-sentence and asked, "Where did you go?" Renee, dreading having to tell him, kept on talking rapidly. But again, Shawn, not hearing a word she was saying, looked down into her eyes and said, "Renee, where did you go?" Renee was overwhelmed by his sullen face and managed to utter, "Montgomery." Shawn looked away and shook his head. He was visibly shocked and hurt.

"You went all the way to Montgomery," he said shaking his head in disbelief, "Without so much as a word?", he continued. Renee felt horrible and apologized repeatedly until Shawn shrugged it off and played it cool. By now Nia realized that Renee had not been responding to her with any affirmations. Kenya and Latoya then made their way back to Nia, and the three girls looked on as Renee was engrossed in a farewell hug with Shawn.

"Who is *that*?", Latoya asked.

"Shawn", Kenya mouthed in astonishment. She couldn't believe her eyes. Her friend was hugging the man who had kept her emotionally unavailable to any other man for two years.

When the pair finished their final embrace, Renee took out a small piece of paper and wrote her number down on it and handed it to Shawn. He took it and stared at it, not saying anything. So Renee asked for his number. But Shawn slowly looked up at her and informed her that he could not give her his number because he was living with someone. Renee was devastated; she had just been declared number two. Sure, years had gone by, but she loved him, and she knew that he still loved her; she could feel it in his embrace. Renee was distraught but had to recover.

"Give me the number," she ordered.

Shawn looked at her.

"Give me the number back," Renee demanded.

"Are you sure?", Shawn questioned.

"Yes." Renee held her hand out to receive the small piece of paper back.

"Are you *sure* you want it back?"

"Yeah, I'm sure!", Renee said hotly as she wiggled her fingers in an effort to hurry him.

Shawn stood there looking down at her. "Renee, I'm gonna ask you one more time and that's it. Do you want me to give you this paper back?"

She nodded her head sassily, looking annoyed and feeling humiliated. "Yes, Shawn, I do."

And with that Shawn dropped the number in her hand and turned to walk away. Renee stood there and watched his back get further and further away from her. She heard her friends yelling her name and turned to join them. On the way to the airport she told them about their exchange, and Kenya was flabbergasted. She felt bad that Renee was so hot-headed and impulsive. As Renee peered out of her window seat on the plane, she knew she had just made another terrible mistake. She couldn't wait to get to home and have a good, long cry.

A year later, on a typical Tuesday morning, Renee signed out of her computer at work to take her usual 10am coffee break. When she walked into the break room, she noticed that it was unusually quiet. There were no cabinets being slammed shut, no water running from the sink, and no clanking sound of a diet coke being dispensed from the vending machine. Instead she saw four random employees standing up, huddled together with their eyes glued to the television. Feeling nosy, Renee moseyed on over to the muted group and peered over someone's shoulder. It was so surreal; she felt as though she were frozen in time. Her mind seemed to be gathering information for what she was seeing in slow motion. She was confused. 'Is this real?', she wondered. Somehow, as she stood there in total shock, her ears managed to deliver the horrifying reality to her brain. Renee was motionless and speechless as she listened to Peter Jennings detail the devastation that occurred that morning, on September, 11th, 2001.

Renee lost all track of time and was barely conscious of where she was. After a while she slowly made her way back to her cubicle and methodically pressed the necessary buttons to begin taking airline reservation calls again. She didn't fumble her words on that call, but her voice was lifeless. As she checked flight availability from Seattle to Memphis for the male caller, she couldn't help but wonder if he knew what he was doing.

"Sir, are you sure you want to book this flight?", she asked.

"Yes, I'm sure," the man said.

Renee proceeded to research flight schedules. The caller could hear her typing and gently asked, "Are you okay?"

All of a sudden Renee awakened from her stupor. She immediately realized that it was she who should be convincing him that it was okay to fly as she was a representative of an airline. Renee was touched that he was concerned about her and reasoned that she couldn't continue taking calls. She assured the man that she was fine and booked his itinerary. Then Renee went home, inserted a blank VHS tape, and recorded as much of Peter Jennings as it allowed.

Four months later Renee's life was at a crossroads. She decided to accept the unbelievably exceptional severance package that her employer offered to all employees in an effort to drastically downsize due to the inevitable transformation of the airline industry. In addition, she finally graduated with her bachelor's in English. Because Renee was aware of the running joke that her major would produce no viable career

opportunities, she decided that it would be wise for her to move back to California, where the job market was better. She had no job and was no longer in school, so the timing was perfect, she reasoned.

Kenya scouted out several apartments for Renee. She settled on a small, one bedroom upper in Long Beach. And she secured a one year temporary data entry job right away. But Renee wanted the security of a permanent position, so she was constantly hunting for better opportunities. One day she got a letter in the mail stating her appointment date and time to test for a city job. Renee was very excited and hopeful that she would pass the test and become a city employee. After all, she had always heard that a local, state or federal government job was the ticket to job security, and she wanted in. She wanted to be self-sufficient, because over time she had come to realize that relying on other people's help and support oftentimes ended in disappointment.

The Saturday of the test, Renee was well-prepared. She made sure that she got her eight hours of sleep the night before, ordered orange juice with her greasy fast food breakfast, and had her number two pencils and calculator in tow. The line at the convention center was incredibly long, but she didn't mind; she was determined to pass the test and get hired. After quite some time of Renee mindlessly shifting her weight from one leg to the other, someone called out her name. Suddenly she felt a sense of panic, for she was nowhere near the front of the line and concluded that something must be wrong. But when she looked all around, she was relieved to see the pleasant, familiar smiling face of her old friend Kimtrell.

"Renee.", Kimtrell said, as though she were posing a question.

"Hey! Oh my goodness; it's been forever.", Renee exclaimed excitedly.

"I know!", Kimtrell said as she moved closer to Renee, who didn't dare step out of line.

The two embraced and couldn't stop smiling. It seemed as though none of their past fighting had ever occurred. They were each thrilled, since both of them hadn't really known if they'd ever see each other again.

"Girl, you look exactly the same!", Renee announced.

"You too!", Kimtrell said looking her over again. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm just taking a test for a customer service job with the city."

"Oh, I was wondering what this line with all these people was for. I'm just picking up some concert tickets for my mom."

"Aw, your mom. How is she?"

"She's good. Everybody's good. But I mean what are you doing in California? Last I heard you had moved to Alabama with your mom."

"Yeah, I did, but I moved back a few months ago."

"Oh my gosh, girl.", Kimtrell shook her head.

“What?”

“I swear I have been looking for you for so long. I tried everything. I wanted you to be in my wedding!”

Renee looked stunned. She was happy for Kimtrell but saddened that she missed had out on sharing such an important occasion in her life. At one time, Renee never believed that she and Kimtrell would not be able to be a part of each other’s major life events.

“Oh, Kimtrell! You got married?”

Kimtrell gushed, “Yes! And I tried my best to find you. I wanted you there for my wedding day.”

Renee hung her head down in disbelief. “I’m so sorry, Kimtrell. I so wish I could have been there.”

They both stood there looking at each other as if to say, ‘we were so stupid and have wasted so much precious time.’

“I used to look at the names of articles in *Essence* to see if you’d written any.”

“You what?”, Renee let out a loud laugh in disbelief. “Me? Oh my gosh, why?”

Kimtrell smiled and said matter-of-factly, “Because you always said that you wanted to write something that would be published in *Essence* magazine.”

Renee was amused. “And you thought that was really gonna happen?”, Renee laughed, feeling so honored that Kimtrell would think that could actually happen.

“With you, girl, nothing would surprise me. You were always one to go hard after what you wanted.”

The old friends laughed and talked as they inched closer to the testing room. They did not mention their past bad behavior towards each other. All had been forgiven a long time ago. Renee learned that Kimtrell had two daughters and had moved a few counties away into a big, brand new home where she was a stay-at-home mom. Renee was very proud of Kimtrell and genuinely happy for her. As Renee listened, she began making mental comparisons between their work and home life, and determined that she lacked noteworthy accomplishments. But she never once felt as though Kimtrell judged her. ‘She is the same old Kimtrell,’ she thought. No time, distance, or argument could keep them from caring for and truly knowing each other. And for that Renee was grateful. Finally reaching Renee’s destination, they happily hugged and exchanged contact telephone numbers and promised to call.

Over a year later Renee’s temporary job ended and she lived off of unemployment benefits until one day she got the call that she had been waiting for. The caller wanted to know if she was still interested in interviewing for the customer service job with the city.

Renee was elated and she was more than confident that she was going to get the job. She knew how to dress, smile, and be articulate for an interview as she had experienced plenty of them. And this one was no different. She got the job. She was on her way, she thought. She anticipated that she would move up the ranks and secure an excellent paying job very soon. And Renee was excited about meeting her coworkers. She imagined that she and her new friends/coworkers would lunch at the various eateries downtown. She also pictured herself walking in her tennis shoes and very trendy business attire with them on her break for a quick exercise. So chic, she thought.

However, it wasn't long before reality set in. Her new coworkers were mostly gray-haired grandmothers who had been working there since they had graduated high school. Everything seemed to be old and outdated. The telephones were old, the fax and copiers were old, and even the coffeemaker was old. The job quickly proved to be anything but the chic. Renee had envisioned being the Carrie Bradshaw of Long Beach with her important downtown job. She was going to dress in modern, stylish businesswoman attire like the sophisticated ladies in *Essence* magazine. But sadly enough, Renee would have blended right in by wearing flooding faux stretch denim jeans with an elastic waist and a Christmas pullover sweater in September.

And it wasn't long before she mastered her job as a customer service representative for the city's utility company. This particular inbound call center job was far less interesting, however, than making airline reservations for people. Her job with the airline had been enjoyable. The people who called in were usually very pleasant and told her stories of their trips. But the callers she got with her city job were almost always disgruntled. They yelled about their service being cut off or demanded to know why their bill was so high. Many times she contemplated answering annoying questions with a snide remark, but she reluctantly refrained because that would, of course, cost her the job.

When the excitement of learning something new and meeting new people wore off, Renee fell into a state of discontentment. She had a constant overwhelming feeling that something was missing. She was twenty-six years old and had nothing but the invisible award for the person with the most jobs and apartments to show for herself. She did nothing. She got cursed and yelled at repeatedly over the phone while working in the midst of senior citizens by day and went home to an empty apartment and overdosed on chips or ice cream by night. Renee was convinced that there was more to life than the meaningless cycle she found herself in. She wondered what the point of it was: working, working, working - and for what: to pay rent at some apartment? 'Wack,' Renee concluded. It soon became an agonizing task to show up to her job every day. She needed more. So Renee busied herself with trying to find a non-profit job. Her life needed meaning, and perhaps being of service to others would give her purpose. She just knew that she couldn't stomach the evil people she had to listen every day. She felt for them, though, because she knew what it was like to be without a utility or two, but she realized that she was too fragile to deal with their meanness. It simply was too much unhappiness and stress to bear on a daily basis.

Renee eventually found a job as an Account Manager. Although it was not a non-profit job and she was still required to interact with clients over the phone, it was by far her most favorite job to date. She enjoyed having specific clients and was successful at accommodating their individual needs. She was proud of her work; and her new private sector job coworkers consisted of young people. Renee did not acquire any friends to

hang with outside of work, but they were pleasant acquaintances to work with. Thus, for the time being, Renee was satisfied.

Renee approached the departure gate at LAX, ready to board her red-eye flight to Alabama for Christmas. When she arrived, she was a little perturbed at the sight of the mass of people waiting for the same flight. The plane would definitely be at full capacity, which meant everything was going to take a long time. She resolved to exercise patience when she saw that there was no seating area that would provide her with personal space. She grudgingly searched for an empty seat and settled on one next to an old Mexican lady with a sweet face who motioned to her that the seat wasn't taken. Luckily there was a table next to her which connected to another empty seat. Renee was at least grateful that she was not literally in between two people, and so she rested her bag on the table since there was barely room for her feet on the floor because of everyone's luggage lying around. So there she sat, calmly amusing herself by watching people. She conjured up imaginary stories for them and eavesdropped on some conversations. And then something caught and kept her attention. He was standing tall, holding a large, expensive-looking duffle bag. He was clean cut and very stylish. It was clear that he had money, or good taste, or both. Renee continued to study him, from his clean, new shoes to his pretty curly hair. She admired his deep red-brown skin that was so clear he looked like he was from some Caribbean island and lived off of fresh water and mangos.

Suddenly, he spotted her and a moment passed before she surrendered her gawk. She was aware that in that moment she was being forward and inappropriate, but he was very attractive and she felt very grown up, prolonging her stare even after she had been caught. Soon, however, Renee reverted back to ancient mannerisms and played coy. She looked away and looked back and away and back again. She even turned and smiled at the old Mexican lady, who returned a more intentional smile as if to say, "I see you, Mija." Feeling a little embarrassed, Renee turned away from the woman and back towards the sophisticated man, but he was not in the same place. Instead he was standing right before her and asked, "Is this seat taken?" Renee, taken aback, smiled. She couldn't believe what was actually happening. It was like a scene from a movie. She had shared a gaze across a crowded room with an attractive man who actually asked, "Is this seat taken?" It was very comical and thrilling for her.

He sat down and introduced himself as Steven. He told her of how he was on his way to North Carolina for a college buddy's wedding. Then he went on about how all of his friends were getting married and explained that he had moved to California to further his career in fashion photography. Renee was pleased to be passing the time with an intriguing, attractive person who evidently did not run in the same circles she did. The more he emphasized his fashion aspirations and networking contacts, the more her fantasy of dating him dwindled. Although Renee could appreciate a well-dressed person, a luxury handbag and dramatic shoes, the extravagant prices and name brands did not impress her. In fact, she thought it a bit of a sin to spend so much money on such items. She considered her Starbucks Espresso Truffle or Café Mocha to be a luxury that she sometimes felt guilty for indulging in a little too often. So Renee was surprised when Steven grabbed his bag and asked for her number when it was time for his flight to board at the adjacent gate.

“Okay, I’ll call you when I get back in town.”, Steven said as he shoved her number into his pocket.

“Okay.”, Renee said with a wide-eyed smile.

“Have a safe trip.”

“You, too!” , Renee called out as she watched him walk all the way to his gate. Her heart melted when he turned and waved at her. ‘How romantic,’ Renee thought, feeling extra special. She slowly looked over at the old Mexican lady whose eyes had been burning the back of her neck the entire time Steven was there and blushed. She got up to call Kenya and share her excitement.

“Girl, I’m telling you it felt like I was in a Hollywood movie or something straight up!”

Kenya laughed. It was good to hear Renee sound so exhilarated and happy. She hadn’t sounded that way too often as of late.

“But I don’t know, Kenya. He probably won’t even call. He probably just felt like he had to ask for my number to be polite; plus, people were around us and maybe he felt pressured kinda.”

“Renee, are you kidding me? There’s no reason for that man to feel pressured into asking you for your number! That’s crazy. Can’t he just like you?”

Renee giggled, “Yeah, I guess. We’ll see if he calls.”

“You guess?”

“Well...I don’t know. I mean he’s all into fashion and stuff, and I wear Payless shoes...”

“Oh my goodness, stop Renee,” Kenya interrupted. “Who cares about that? He’ll call. I think it’s good. You always say that you need to start dating, so here’s your chance. He seems like a nice guy, so don’t rule him out already. Besides, you need to see that there are other guys out in the world other than Shawn.”

Renee knew Kenya was right. For far too long she had kept Shawn in her heart and mind. She was convinced that he was the one who got away. It was a habit for her to refer to him any time the girls would get together and talk about their men. Shawn was the only one she could talk about when she wanted to chime in and cosign on any given universal women’s perfectly absurd comment or idea about men.

“Well, you’re right. Like I said, we’ll see if he calls. I better go. They’re startin’ to board.”

“All right. Have fun.”

“I will. Thanks.”

To Renee’s surprise, Steven called. They had a few phone conversations, and then he asked her if she wanted to meet for coffee since she liked Starbucks so much. It

wasn't a movie followed by a meal, but a coffee date was still acceptable to her because there was no sense in him spending real money on a date before knowing how they would interact on an outing, she figured. Plus, a coffee date could be as long or as short as they wanted. It wouldn't be awkward to split after one cup if it wasn't going well. Renee anticipated her date with Steven all day. She ate an extra light breakfast and drank lots of water and chewed gum throughout the day. She wanted to save her daily allotted calories for her date. She and Kenya were in a sort of competition to prove which diet worked best. Kenya decided to do the Atkins diet, while Renee opted for Weight Watchers. They had already been dieting for two months with one more month to go. Renee had lost twenty pounds and was almost as skinny as she was in high school.

Feeling cute in her new svelte body, Renee squeezed into her tight jeans, put on a sexy top, and curled her hair. When she arrived, she and Steven hugged, and she inhaled his delicious cologne as he complimented her on how nice she looked. They talked and smiled well after their first cup of mocha. Renee really enjoyed herself and looked forward to spending more time with the seemingly perfect guy who she met by happenstance. A couple of nights later, however, her anticipation balloon deflated.

It was after nine o'clock when Steven called, and Renee could hear what sounded like his TV in the background. She was happy to hear from him. They chatted a while about his day, and then she started to tell him about her day. And she excitedly went on and on until she realized that he wasn't saying anything. She wondered if he heard her.

"Steven?", Renee asked.

There was no answer.

"Steven?"

She heard him let out a sort of moan.

"Steven. Are you sleep?"

He didn't say anything.

"Steven."

All of a sudden she could hear faint moaning. A thought came to her that she quickly dispelled. 'Surely, he was not masturbating to the sound of her calling his name while he watched porn or something', she hoped. She was nervous about calling his name out again, but she had to know what in the world was going on. 'Why had he stopped talking altogether,' she contemplated. Hesitantly, Renee called out his name again, and she heard him make a noise that was unmistakably a moan from sexual pleasure. Renee, feeling disgusted and disrespected, slammed the phone down angrily. She was appalled, for she had never experienced anything as perverse as that. 'What a nasty guy,' she concluded 'he doesn't know me like that.' So when Steven called two nights later, Renee didn't answer the phone. He got her voice mail the next two times he called until he got the hint.

Stuck again in her usual cycle of going to work, then retreating to her apartment, then going back to work, Renee became restless. Her lifestyle was boring, and she was lonely. Every single one of her friends had kids and were either already married or in a relationship. Kimtrell and her husband owned a home, and Kenya and her man and their kids rented a home. They had yards and driveways. They could hang up Christmas lights on their houses and have barbeques in their backyards. They had families; they had love. They had what Renee wanted. And the more that she focused on being single and lonely, the more agitated she got.

However, Renee did her best to encourage herself and stay positive. She figured that just because she didn't have a husband and kids yet didn't mean that she couldn't own a home. She wanted to feel successful and accomplished, the way she saw her friends. Thus, Renee subconsciously took on another project to mask her feeling of emptiness and obsessed over buying a home. The fact that she lived check to check and was scared to know her credit score didn't matter. She dropped by open houses on the weekend and scoured the newspaper and various websites for affordable properties. It quickly became apparent that the only homes she could even think about owning were not just in the hood but on the wrong side of the hood or in the boonies. So Renee turned her attention toward condos, but she wasn't impressed. As cute and quaint as many were, they were no comparison for what she could buy for the same money in the South. She just couldn't see buying a closet sized condo with a designated parking space in a cramped alley without storage space or a view.

One Saturday Renee officially gave up her house hunting when she pulled her car up to the address listed on the open house flyer that promised a "spacious floor plan, modern amenities and a view to die for." She shook her head as she looked down at the flyer again to double-check that she was at the right place. She thought for a second that a film crew was going to pop out of nowhere and scream, "Surprise! You've been tricked!" But that didn't happen and Renee thought, "A view to die for...they weren't lying." She was in the seediest of neighborhoods and decided not to waste her time going in. Instead, she drove across the street to a liquor store to get a soda. When she got out, she noticed a group of guys hanging out in front of the barbershop next door. The tallest one caught her attention. He was very thin and light-skinned with pretty wooly hair. He wore khaki pants and a white T-shirt. And they stared at each other until she entered the store. Renee searched for her drink and kind of hoped that he'd still be out there when she walked out. She closed the freezer door and turned to head for the cashier when she saw him walking towards her. She smiled when he said, "I was looking for you."

"You were?"

"Oh, yeah. I saw you and said that's what I need right there."

A wide grin spread across Renee's face. She was very flattered. He paid for her drink and walked her to her car. He introduced himself as Rico, and after he got her number, he asked for a hug. Renee put her arms up high and he leaned down and squeezed her, and as he let her go, he kissed her on her cheek. She smiled all the way home, filled with the excitement of new possibility.

Rico called Renee that same night as well as the next two days. Their conversations revealed that he liked to indulge in hood activities. And while Renee

equally enjoyed a backyard barbeque or a house party, she didn't know him or his folks well enough to go anywhere like that with him. So when he asked her to accompany him that Sunday to the roller skating rink for old school night, she turned him down. She had not been to the roller skating rink since she was in junior high. It was hood then, and she was sure it still was. It was definitely not a situation she was going to put herself in. 'I wouldn't know anyone but him, and I don't even know him like that,' she reasoned, 'anything could go down.'

"C'mon. All da homies gon' be there. What else you gotta do?," Rico pleaded with her.

"Rico, that's just not my thing." A moment of silence passed. "Thanks for inviting me though." Renee was adamant about her decision.

"Aw'ite den. I'll get at you later."

"Ok. Bye."

"Yeah," Rico said and hung up the phone.

Renee didn't hear from Rico the over the next couple of days. But Sunday afternoon her doorbell rang and it was Rico. She was surprised to see him at her door. He wanted to know what 'hood' she lived in. She had told him what street she lived on but she had never told him what apartment she lived in. As she peered out of the peep hole, she wondered how he knew where she lived. Then she rationalized that there was only one apartment building on her block, and there were only four units in the complex. Renee hurriedly opened the door to cease his yelling her out her name and pounding on the door.

"Hey, baby."

"Hey," Renee said looking puzzled.

"What took you so long to open the door?! You got some fool in there?!"

Renee was visibly shocked. "No, I don't."

"Good, I don't wanna have to knock nobody out."

Renee became instantly annoyed. "Rico, how did you know what apartment I lived in?"

"The other day you was talkin' 'bout you dropped yo' groceries down the stairs so I knew you lived upstairs and that one got baby toys out front," Rico explained as he pointed to the toys in front of her neighbors' door. "And you ain't tole me you had no babies so I figured this one."

Renee just nodded.

Rico stood there smiling at her and then demanded, "Get dressed, I'm 'bout to take you to ol' school night."

Renee's eyes widened. She was speechless.

“Come on, girl, hurry up.”

“Rico, what are talking about? You know I don’t wanna go to that.”

“Aw’ite, aw’ite. I just was seeing if you’d change yo’ mind.”

Renee shook her head emphatically. Just then Rico picked her up and started walking downstairs, leaving her door wide open. “Rico! What are you doing?!” Renee cried out. As soon as they got down from the staircase, Renee tried to wiggle herself out of his grip. But Rico held her tighter. Again she yelled, “What are you doing?”

“If you ain’t going wit me, then you could at least let the homies see you.”

Renee yelled, “No Rico! No! I’m not dressed!” She wore white shorts that were so short they looked like panties, a fitted tank top with no bra, and her hair was in a disheveled top knot bun. She had lost an additional ten pounds and won the debate she had had with Kenya about which diet was more effective. Renee was smaller than she was in high school at 138 pounds, and she felt great. But even with her cute figure, Renee was highly uncomfortable about being put on display for some strange men. Rico loosened his grip and let Renee down in front of a 1987 Monte Carlo SS with tinted windows on rims. Three rough-looking guys looked her over as she tried to discreetly pull her shorts down from rising up between her thighs. She was mortified and felt like a piece of meat.

“This Renee,” Rico said proudly as he looked at her smiling.

“Hey,” she said and gave an awkward wave to the strangers in the car.

“Damn, that’s you cuz?”, Renee heard one of the guys in the car say as she turned to run back upstairs. Rico laughed and jumped into the car and sped off. Renee was totally turned off by Rico’s behavior. She was angry that he would show her half-naked body to strange men against her will - strange men who now knew what she looked like, her name, and where she lived. A couple of days later Rico called Renee to tell her he wanted to take her to a pool party and ordered her not to say no, but she did.

“I mean, damn, girl. You telling me you ain’t got no man and everythang, but you keep tellin’ me no, ya know what I’m sayin’? So wad up wit dat? I mean, no disrespect, but it’s not like you da most prettiest girl in da worl’.”

Renee had already resolved that she was done with Rico the day he had dropped by unannounced, so his insult didn’t even faze her.

“Well, I never claimed to be, so why don’t you just go find one that is.”

Rico sucked his teeth in frustration. “Man, I don’t need this. I’m out.” And with that he hung up the phone, and she never saw or heard from him again.

Since Renee felt like her club days were over, her girlfriends decided to take her to Magic Johnson’s TGIF restaurant in Inglewood. According to Kenya’s friend, Latoya,

there was an abundance of eye candy there in addition to the good food. On the way there, her friends insisted she have a few drinks. Renee said she would since it was her birthday. The diet competition that she had had the year before with Kenya was the catalyst that prompted Renee's new healthy lifestyle - one that didn't include alcohol. She maintained a healthy weight by exercising daily and eating healthier foods in moderation. She felt the best she ever had. Her skin was clear and her hair was shiny and healthy.

After a couple of hours of laughter and many drinks, Renee and her friends exited the booth, leaving mountains of half-eaten appetizers and entrees on the table. They walked outside to a sea of men. There were little groups of them everywhere. A small car club was huddled in one area around their cars with the doors and hoods up and music blaring out of them. And other men were standing near the door, gawking at the ladies, including Renee and her friends. One guy tugged on Latoya's shirt as they strolled by laughing. She stopped to talk to him while the other girls walked on a little to give them privacy but still kept their eye on her. Just then Renee noticed a tall, slender very light-skinned guy looking at her.

"He's cute," Renee announced. "He's real cute."

"Who?", Kenya asked.

"That tall, light-skinned dude over there."

Kenya followed Renee's eyes and said, "Who, that white dude?"

"Girl, he ain't white!", Renee declared. "Wait a minute. Is he?"

Kenya and Kimtrel laughed as they both insisted he was.

"Well, that's one cute white boy!", Renee laughed.

"Would you talk to a white guy?", Kimtrel asked.

"I could see you with a white boy," said Kenya.

"You could?", Renee said, surprised.

"Yeah, a white guy would probably totally love you. You know they secretly love black women.", Kenya informed them.

Renee continued to laugh. "You know what? At this point I'm down for whatever! Why not? I mean a white guy would probably take me out to a nice restaurant and open the door for me and..."

"And ask you to go skiing with him in the mountains!", Kenya interrupted, laughing hard.

"Or take you surfing!", Kimtrel chimed in.

Renee shook her head and they all continued to laugh loudly. Latoya joined them and started talking about how fine the guy at the door was when all of a sudden a black

guy came up to them and said, "Excuse me," looking straight at Renee, "but my friend over there wants to know if he can holla at you for a minute." He nodded his head towards the white boy, who waved at her. The girls were quiet as they waited in suspense for her response.

"Tell him if he wants to talk to me, then he can come over here himself."

The guy looked at her as though he had just accepted an interesting challenge. He rubbed his chin and smiled and returned to his friend. The girls began to hoot and holler.

"Girl! Renee's bout to get her a white boy!", Latoya screamed.

They broke out in even more boisterous laughter. Just then the white guy, along with his buffer, approached them. "How you ladies doing tonight?" The grinning girls all chirped, "Fine." They were all surprised by his tone and the bass in his voice. It was very reminiscent of the voice of his black friend. Some guys just have that certain something that oozes cool, and the white guy definitely had it.

"Hi," he said looking directly into Renee's eyes. "I'm Tom. You mind if I talk to you for a lil bit?"

Tom held out his hand. Renee put her hand in his and they walked a few steps away from their friends. He told her that he came there often and was surprised that he'd never seen her there before.

"Oh, I don't do too much hanging out anymore. It's rare if I go out. Tonight is because it's my birthday.", Renee explained.

"Okay, well, happy birthday to you, then."

"Thank you," Renee said with a smile.

He told her that he, too, lived in Long Beach and that they'd have to hang out some time. She agreed that would be fun and they exchanged numbers. Renee then retrieved her friends. They piled into the car and took off, but not before circling the parking lot a few more times to scope out other guys. As Kimtrel flew down the freeway she asked, "So?! What happened? What's he like?"

"Okay, why did he sound like a black dude? That was a let down. I was looking forward to a real white dude. A cookie-cutter, hang ten type dude.", Renee playfully whined as she held up the hang ten sign.

Tom called Renee a few days later and disclosed that he worked part-time at UPS. When Renee asked why he only worked part-time, he said because it gave him freedom to do what he wanted.

"I don't really need a lot of money. All I do is hang out, and my rent is stupid cheap cause I got a roommate.", Tom bragged.

Renee was far from impressed. She was twenty-eight years old and knew that she had nothing in common with a grown man content working a part-time job so he'd have more time to "be free." And when she found out that his roommate was an older white female, she was convinced that she had the wrong white dude.

Renee finally received her mother's package with her birthday gift in the mail. She was given the Target and Starbucks gift cards that she had asked for but there was something else inside. It was a book entitled "Ending the Search for Mr. Right", by Michelle McKinney Hammond. When Renee called her mom to thank her, her mother asked her if she had seen the gag gift she had put in there. Renee said 'yes' as she rolled her eyes while her mom wailed noisily over the phone. "I saw it at a yard sale and thought of you!" She could barely catch her breath from laughing so hard. Renee didn't find it quite as amusing and tossed the book on her cluttered desk.

Months later, while Renee was organizing her desk, she came across the book under mounds of papers and bills. She picked it up and thumbed through it to decide if it was going in the trash. But as she flipped through the pages she noticed the words "Ruth" and "God" and saw that the book included actual scriptures. Renee was immediately intrigued. She stopped what she was doing and slowly sat down on the couch, fully engaged in the forward section of the book. She didn't want to put the book down but she had to. She saw that the author indicated that the book would reference the Book of Ruth in the bible. Renee decided that she needed to read Ruth. She knew nothing of Ruth other than that there was someone in the bible with that name.

Thus, her research began. Renee pulled her bible from her bookcase and dusted it off. She read the short bible story and then became engrossed in her gag gift. Renee got through several chapters before her phone rang. It was Kenya. Renee couldn't wait to tell her what she had just discovered.

"Girl, remember that book I told you that my mom bought me about finding Mr. Right?"

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Well, I was cleaning up and about to throw it away when I saw that it was like a religious book. To me it's not even really about finding Mr. Right at all. It helps you find yourself!"

"Hmm...that sounds interesting."

"It is! Girl, I can't put it down. It is so good. This lady totally breaks the book of Ruth down. Have you read Ruth in the bible?"

"No, but I remember that story. Wasn't her husband Boaz?", Kenya asked.

"Yes! See, I didn't even know that. I just barely read it. It's only four chapters long. But, I'm telling you this book is really, really good. We should start a book club and this could be our first book!", Renee suggested enthusiastically.

"Yeah, but girl, I got a man so I'm not looking for Mr. Right."

“I know but I told you it’s not about that for real. Every woman should read this book. It makes you remember exactly who you are!” Renee exclaimed passionately.

“Well, I’m down.”

Renee went on, “Yeah we could read all the books in the bible and each take turns hosting a different one every meeting!”

“I mean that sounds cool, but I don’t know if the rest of the girls are gonna be into having a book club and reading nothing but the bible.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I mean we could start with this book you’re talking about but the next book could be something totally different like...what’s the name of that book you said was the best book you read in a long time and you told me to get it?”

“The Coldest Winter Ever?”

“Yeah, I think that’s it. That could be our second book.”, Kenya offered.

“Yeah, girl, that book is the bomb. I couldn’t put it down. That one and *Their Eyes are Watching God* I read from front to back without stopping.”

“All right, well let’s do it.”

“Cool!”, Renee said happily.

She later finished the book and realized that what had been meant to be a joke was actually a book that provoked her. Renee felt powerful after reading, and it sparked her curiosity about other books in the bible. She had never really experienced equating bible stories to real life before, but the idea fascinated her.

After several attempts, the book club never got off of the ground and Renee’s bible was placed back on her bookshelf.

One evening as Renee left work she noticed that smoke was coming out from the hood of her car. She was a nervous wreck until she made it safely home. She saw her neighbor outside and asked him if he knew why it might be smoking. He suggested that the car needed water and told her to open the hood. He put water in it and instructed her to go to a body shop to have a mechanic check to see if she needed a new hose. The next day Renee was relieved that she did not see smoke. The mechanic confirmed that she needed a new hose along with a long list of other things she needed for her used vehicle to run properly. Renee expected that because she was a young woman by herself, she’d be told that she needed a whole gamut of things repaired on her car so she was unyielding in her authorization to only replace the hose. She lied and told the mechanic that she’d be back later to repair the rest.

Then a few months later Renee, running late, rushed to her car hoping to get to work on time. She stopped dead in her tracks when she saw it. Her front driver’s side tire was completely flat. In that moment, Renee was devastated. She couldn’t think of

how to fix the situation; she didn't know where to start. Her neighbor had already left and she did not know what do to next. Then she realized that there was no way possible way that she could get to work on time, which utterly overwhelmed her. She walked back upstairs to her apartment, kicked her shoes off, threw her purse on the couch and disappointedly called off of work. When she hung up the phone, Renee flung herself onto her couch and cried and moaned. She started to feel sad that she didn't have a man of her own to call to come help her. There was no family around to help either and she kept telling herself how very alone she was. Later, her pity party turned into anger and she felt like she worked hard and deserved a new car. She reasoned that she needed a new car for security purposes because she could only depend on herself. And depending on herself to take care of her car was not very settling for Renee because she didn't know anything about them beyond getting regular oil changes. Suddenly she remembered that she was paying for tow service every month, which was included in her cell phone bill. She called them and had her car towed to Sears and got her tired replaced.

But Renee's mind was made up. She was fully convinced that the answer to all of her problems was to get a new car. She was partial to the trendy Lexus SUV that seemed to be driven only by well-to-do, beautiful, happy ladies. But Renee, being practical, knew full well that she could never afford a luxury vehicle. She didn't make a substantial amount of money and even if she did her credit was appalling. All the credit cards that she opened the first day that she set foot on her college campus were still haunting her. She was unaware that being lured over to a table and a tent and to accept a free Frisbee and plastic cup would trap her into a whirlwind of overwhelming debt. She drew all of the grants and student loans that she was permitted to pay her creditors and to supplement her income.

So Renee set her sights on a non-luxury SUV that resembled the Lexus quite nicely and had a much lower price tag. That Saturday, she drove her used Toyota with new tires over to the dealership. It wasn't long before the salesman, with the permanent smile, offered her the vehicle with "zero money down!" She had just test-driven and fell in love with the brand new SUV, but declined the offer. She informed the salesman that she needed to trade in or sell her vehicle first, because she didn't need two cars. The man knew that her Toyota was valuable and had minute issues, so he offered her \$1500 for it. Renee declined his offer again, once she saw that he would buy her car. She hoped to get at least \$2500 for it to pay off the three payday loans that she had committed herself to pay on a biweekly basis. The interest on the loans was hammering her finances. An hour and a half later, Renee inserted two thousand dollars cash into her empty wallet and drove off the lot in her brand new SUV, but not before being up sold on a warranty that she later found covered no services that she was ever in need of. Renee felt well-to-do, beautiful and happy as she drove her new car to the various payday loan spots to pay her debt. Unfortunately, it did not take long for the honeymoon to come to an end. Renee never contemplated just how she was going to make the \$470 monthly car payment, excluding car insurance. Therefore, her vacation from struggling financially was short-lived.

Renee had been looking forward to her Christmas vacation for a long time. She was going to Montgomery for thirteen days. Even though it was just a trip to her mother's house, Renee longed for a change of scenery. She was back to loathing her

monotonous life. And she had become obsessed with the idea of having to make more money. Her bills were getting the best of her emotionally and she vehemently searched for job openings that might appeal to her. And each day she became depressed all over again when she didn't find that perfect, fulfilling, prestigious, high-paying job during her daily internet job hunting.

In preparation for her trip, Renee took out four payday loans to pay for her airline ticket and buy Christmas gifts for her family. She knew that the number of outstanding loans was dangerously excessive but it was Christmas and she planned to pay them off with her income tax return. She felt like she had to keep up with the Joneses, or in her case, the Lavenders. As usual, her older sister would lavish the family with very expensive gifts, for she started her own successful business as a much sought after makeup artist for several well-known celebrities. Renee was aware that her gifts would not compare, but she at least had to be in the game and it took money to play. And even though Renee's younger sister was in her same financial boat, she always managed to somehow outplay Renee on Christmas day.

"I don't know how you have the money to buy the boys expensive electronics all the time?", Renee exclaimed every Christmas.

"I don't, but I'll figure it out somehow," was the answer her sister always gave. She wouldn't be surprised if she postponed paying her rent to buy gifts. Renee couldn't go that far, but borrowing money from four local loan sharks was pretty close. Each year it seemed as though the three sisters attempted to give their younger brothers the most impressive gifts. The result left the boys spoiled beyond belief and Renee flat broke.

Renee was excited the day of her flight; she really enjoyed the whole travel experience. She researched the available food options for sale on her flights and made sure that she put aside funds for the delicious cheese plate that she couldn't wait to treat herself to. She already knew what movie she would buy and she looked forward to stopping at Seattle's Best Coffee in Atlanta during her layover, for a yummy cup of hot chocolate. Renee also got a kick out of spotting celebrities which was almost inevitable at LAX. She looked like one herself as she approached the ticket counter. She carried her cell phone and brand-new shiny, black travel bag from Target, which could have easily been mistaken for a luxury, designer bag, in one hand. And she rolled her sporty-looking, Wal-Mart carry-on that looked like a Tommy Hilfiger original in the other. She wore a pullover sweater, scarf and comfortable jeans which were tucked into cozy Payless boots. After getting her boarding pass, Renee bought a café mocha from Starbucks and took a seat near an outlet to charge her phone. She sipped on her drink and just watched all the many people for a long while before diving into the latest fashion magazines that she kept in her purse. Soon, she boarded the flight bound for Alabama.

She arrived around noon to a partly cloudy day and became increasingly irritated as she waited for her brother to pick her up. 'He should be waiting on me,' she thought, 'not the other way around.' And just before she was about to call him to go completely off on him, she heard a horn honk. He was saved by the bell. He got out of their mom's car to put her luggage inside and Renee's irritation vanished after giving him a big bear hug and kiss. She loved her little brothers tremendously. Even still, something inside of her would not let it go, and she began to scold him for not being there when she arrived. He rolled his eyes and drove. When she saw that he had shut down after apologizing,

Renee left it alone. She wasn't satisfied from complaining to him and immediately regretted doing it. She knew that it just wasn't necessary. So Renee changed the subject. She was full of energy and excited to be away from her job and the dull, lonely life she had back home. Renee asked her brother to take her to their mom's job, thinking that it would be fun to surprise her, rather than wait to see her when she got home that evening as planned.

When she saw her mom, they hugged and kissed and were all smiles. Her mother happily introduced her to some new employees. They chatted a bit and Renee pleaded with her mother to remove the unfavorable pictures of her that were framed on the desk. Renee smiled and shook her head knowing that she was not going to win that battle.

After some time and after looking at her brother's dreadfully bored face, she got up and told her mom that she'd see her at the house later. Her brother, acting annoyed, hadn't got up from his seat yet, which prompted Renee to give him an evil eye, when suddenly they heard a loud bang. They all looked towards the door and saw a dark chocolate man, with an eye-catching physique, standing there harshly maneuvering a dolly full of boxes. 'Who is this roughneck?', Renee thought. His demeanor was very mannish.

"Hey, Tracey!", Renee's mother exclaimed excitedly.

Her mother was very pretty and from the way Tracey's eyes lit up it was obvious that he thought so.

"Hey, Ms. James", Tracey said as he blushed.

Renee's brother quickly changed from feeling annoyed to skeptical as he observed the man, who looked so energized when he saw his mother.

"Tracey, this is my middle daughter the one whose picture I showed you last time, remember?"

"Yes, ma'am, I sure do.", Tracey said nodding and staring at Renee with a hungry grin.

Renee was immediately annoyed at the thought of her mother showing pictures of her to strange delivery men. Her mother went on about how he was so hard-working, and how he had such great manners. And he commented on how nice and pretty she was, which caused her to be even more animated. All the while Renee and her brother watched the two of them exchange wide smiles, as they both wondered if now would be a good time to kindly make their exit. But just then, Mrs. James blurted out that Renee was going to be in town for the holidays, and perhaps the two of them could go to dinner and a movie. Renee was fuming. She was a fully grown woman listening to her mother set up a play date with a strange man, and she was furious. Renee's brother, however, found it extremely amusing, as he read his sister's face. He could see her trying hard to conceal her fury. He was the only one in the room who could practically see fire bursting out of her ears. Her anger subsided a little when she glanced at her brother and saw his smirk. At least somebody understood.

So within minutes, cell phone numbers were exchanged, and Renee and her brother walked out of the building, leaving Tracey and their mother to their work. In the

car, Renee endured joke after joke from her brother. She ignored him, which only encouraged him more. She looked out of the window and remembered Tracey's body, which was picture perfect from delivering heavy boxes all day. He was about 6'1" and his face was not unattractive but his hair was. She was, in no way, attracted to a grown man with cornrolls. In her opinion, that hairstyle was only permissible for little boys and men in prison. But, despite the fact that she was not sure if he was into her mother or not, she was a tad bit intrigued about the possibility of going out with him. Spending time with him would surely spice up her vacation. It would also be the perfect escape from her family, when being around them for long periods of time would, no doubt, eventually become irksome.

And so during her vacation Tracey came by her mother's house to pick her up for a dinner date. Her mother excitedly introduced him to the rest of the family. While at dinner, Renee discovered that Tracey had a twin sister and that his mother moved them from Florida back to Alabama to live with his grandmother after his parents got divorced. Their conversation proved that he loved his mother immensely and that he was very protective of his sister. Renee got the sense that any woman he was with would have a hard time competing for his attention and affection. However, despite Renee's pessimistic interpretations of Tracey's every word, she actually enjoyed herself. She liked hearing stories of the magical life of a twin. And she found it admirable that he was so proud of his well-paying job, and that one of his goals was to one day buy a big rig and start his own delivery business. As Tracey drove Renee back to her mother's house, he asked her to promise him that she would call, just as soon as she made it to California safely. She promised, and the date ended with a kiss.

About three months after having met Tracey it became official. Renee was Tracey's "ladybug." The two lovebirds were on the phone, just as they had been every day since Renee returned to California, when he asked her to be his lady. Renee had a boyfriend. Yet, she didn't have just any boyfriend. She had a boyfriend that didn't leave his clothes on the floor or hog the only TV, watching sports all day, or come in late, or complain about how long she was on the phone with her girlfriends. No, Renee didn't have the same troubles her girlfriends did. However, she did have a bed too big for one person, an empty apartment to come home to every night, no one to cook for and no one to rescue her from being the only one without her man at any given event. Despite what she was lacking in her relationship with Tracey, she looked forward to talking to him and sharing as much of her life with him as she could.

Noemi Jenkins was a new employee at Renee's job. She was a mixed girl, Mexican mother and Black father, with jet black curly hair. She had a cutesy look about her, very girly. And she was very down-to-earth, which is what attracted Renee to her. They had a similar sense of humor and many of the same interests. Renee liked her. In spite of this, she was a bit standoffish toward Noemi. She thought that Noemi had it all together. She had a new car, trendy clothes and apparently enough money to buy takeout for lunch daily. Moreover, she always had a smile on her face and a sweet personality. She seemed not to have a care in the world. To Renee, Noemi was just out of her league. She wondered what she was doing wrong, what prevented her from being able to afford trendy clothes and eight dollar lunches every day. She just figured that Noemi befriended her because she saw her as a charity case. So when Noemi invited her to her birthday

dinner, Renee was flattered.

Renee slowly drove down a Beverly Hills street looking for the fancy little restaurant where Noemi's party was being held; she felt nervous. She imagined lots of skinny, chic, bubbly women and snobby, stylish metrosexual men who would be in attendance. Even though Renee anticipated being the biggest girl at the party at 176 lbs, she was pleased with her outfit. She didn't have the luxury of purchasing prints and trends when shopping for clothing, so she stuck with classic pieces. She put forth a special effort to pull together an acceptable look for a Noemi's fancy dinner party. When she arrived at her destination, her nervousness increased when she saw that the only parking option was valet. She was now pretty sure that she would have to order an appetizer as her entrée.

Renee walked into the restaurant feeling very proud. A year ago she would never have accepted Noemi's invitation. She would have come up with any and every excuse not to attend. She would have let all of her insecurities, doubts and fears get in the way. But life was getting too boring. She decided that she would begin accepting any offer to go anywhere, at this point. After all, her girlfriends really didn't have time to go to the movies or happy hour or to a music festival or neighborhood fair, as often as she would have liked. Therefore, Renee began going to the movies by herself and found out that it wasn't bad at all. In fact, she preferred it, because she didn't have to pay for a movie she didn't want to see or engage in commentary throughout it. Renee also found that she could happily stroll through the local farmers market on Saturday mornings by herself. She took pleasure in buying fresh fruit as she sipped her blueberry lemonade that she bought faithfully from an elderly couple, even though they filled it with too much ice. And although she never thought she would, one day Renee even took Beth, a white coworker, ten years her senior, up on her offer to begin walking together during their break times. It soon became a part of Renee's day that she looked forward to. Taking the time to go outside and breathe in the fresh air helped to distress from the demands of her job. Moreover, she enjoyed listening to Beth ramble on about her various flings. She even joined her at a couple of pubs after work from time to time. Renee really felt as though she were venturing out, coming out of her shell and really living life. Thus, she could not say no to Noemi.

When Renee walked inside the restaurant she immediately noticed that it was a much more casual atmosphere than she had anticipated. There was no low lighting or white linen tables. It was a teppanyaki-style Japanese restaurant and there were lots of people laughing and talking seemingly loud.

"Renee!", Noemi yelled out, waving her hand.

Renee walked over to the table where Noemi sat with two other girls and handed her a card with a \$25 giftcard tucked inside. Noemi was dressed like a birthday girl with extra makeup and sparkly clothes. She even had a playful tiara on that had 'I can cry if I want to' inscribed on it. The girl sitting next to her was average looking, kind of stiff. But the girl that Renee sat next to was a talker. She was a pretty girl with a trendy haircut, dressed in all black except for the glistening, silver Tiffany chain, that was showcased around her neck. She mainly boasted about her boyfriend. And she whimpered about how she'd have to cut back on her shopping because of her new car payment, which she revealed was ten dollars less than Renee's. All in all. Renee was

more relieved than annoyed by the girl's constant chatter because she gave them all something to listen to and laugh about the entire evening. The food was priced modestly and was delicious. Renee was having a pleasant time.

After dinner was over the girls walked outside to get their cars. As they stood in the cold, waiting on the valet, they exchanged pleasantries. Renee told Noemi's friends how nice it was to meet them and thanked Noemi again for inviting her. As Noemi's friends talked to one another, Renee took her aside and said, "This was a lot of fun. I had a really great time."

"I'm so glad you came, Renee. This really *was* fun! It beats watching TV with my mom like I do every night." She shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Girl, I just gotta get my own place fast!" She laughed and said, "And thanks so much for the money and cute card. Now she won't be the only one with a Tiffany necklace," Noemi exclaimed as she glanced at her friend. "I'm gonna take this twenty-five dollars straight downtown to the Alley and get one that looks identical!" Noemi winked and let out a big laugh. Renee, with raised eyebrows, just smiled at her; she couldn't believe it.

Then she noticed her fairly new SUV pulling up behind a shiny, black BMW SUV, which was about the same size as hers. "Oh, okay there's my car coming up," Renee said, thinking she was leaving the girls behind. "So, I'll see you at work Monday," she said with a smile. But Renee quickly realized that she was the one being left behind. She stood there wide-eyed and dumbfounded as she watched the valet guy hand the keys to the shiny, black BMW to the chatterbox girl who was dressed in all black. Renee forced a smile in an effort to conceal her amazement, as Noemi and her friends tipped the man and piled into the new vehicle. Renee waved as the shiny, black BMW drove off. Just then, the other valet guy tooted the horn in her non-luxury, 'affordable' SUV. She embarrassingly handed the man a dollar and drove off vowing to herself that one day she'd have good credit.

Lying in bed, Renee listened as Tracey told her about the issues he was facing at work with his new boss. "Don't worry about him. He's probably just tryna flex 'cause he's new," Renee said, trying to encourage him.

"Yeah, I guess.", Tracey said, sounding tried. "You know, I don't even feel like talking about it anymore, ladybug. Tell me what's going with you."

"Nothing much, just laying here relaxing," Renee purred.

"Relaxing huh?", Tracey said.

"Yeah," Renee giggled.

Tracey was always immediately turned on by the sound of her giggling. "When you coming back here to see me?"

"Hmm, I dunno." Renee replied. "Probably not before next Christmas."

"Oh, nah, I can't wait that long!", Tracey exclaimed.

Renee giggled again, flattered.

“For real...when you coming back out here?”

“I’ll be on the next flight.”, Renee said jokingly.

“No, I’m serious, babygirl. I need to see you.”, Tracey said sternly.

Renee was surprised. She had been certain that he was just talking nonsense. ‘He can’t really think that I have the money to fly back to Alabama to see him,’ Renee thought.

“Tracey, are you serious?”, Renee asked.

“Yeah, I’m serious!”, Tracey howled.

Renee didn’t say anything and they sat in silence for a few seconds. Then Tracey said in a solemn voice, “You don’t understand girl, you were like medicine to me when I met you.”

Renee was blown away by his honesty and vulnerability. She was completely touched.

“Tracey.”, Renee whimpered.

“I wanna see you.”

“I wanna see you, too, but Tracey, I just don’t have like that. I can’t afford to fly out there now or anytime soon. I wish could, but I just can’t. I live check to check. I couldn’t even really afford going out there at Christmas and now my refrigerator is acting up. I just can’t.”

“I’ll send you the money.”

“What?!”

“I’ll send you the money, but I want you to come on back out here.”

“Tracey, that’s a lot of money and....”, Renee started.

“...and I’ve got it, so I’m gonna send it. I wanna see you, you wanna see me, so I’ll send you the money.”, Tracey interrupted.

Renee sighed, relinquishing her protest. She wanted to see him, but the thought of all that money being spent on an airline ticket, for a random visit, seemed excessive. But, it was his money, and she would be glad to see him.

“So, find a ticket and let me know how much you need.”

“Okay.” Renee consented.

“And Renee?”

“Yeah?”

“You know I’m gonna want some suga when you get here.” Tracey warned.

Renee paused, “Yeah...I know.”

“All right. I’ll talk to you later.”

“All right,” Renee said, as she hung up the phone.

Renee’s mother was very excited about Tracey sending for her to visit him. She got off early that Friday to spend time with Renee. They went out to lunch and she told her daughter that she thought it was very promising of him to have taken such an interest in her. She was a bigger fan of his than Renee was. Renee cared for Tracey, but they’d other known each other for a few months and she was mainly enjoying his attention. But her mother kept reminding her that she was going to turn 30 the following year and that it was time that she “start thinking about settling down.” Renee was annoyed by her mother’s constant focus on her 30th birthday and she was certainly put off every time she was reminded that her mother was already remarried with five children by her age. Nevertheless, she delighted in being able to talk to her mom about a guy she liked. It was fun to be giddy with her.

That evening, Tracey picked Renee up from her mother’s house. After much gushiness between Tracey and Renee’s mother, the couple left, bound for Birmingham. Once there, Tracey checked them into a hotel. They went in to check the room and leave their overnight bags there before heading out to dinner.

“You wanna change? Every time I see you you’re always so dressed up.” Tracey stated.

Renee was taken aback. ‘Dressed up?’, she thought. She was wearing a long, brown maxi dress with tan wedges, gold bangles and gold hoop earrings. She only wanted to look nice so that she felt comfortable and at her best, and also so that Tracey would like her appearance, or so she thought. Somewhat offended, Renee informed Tracey that she didn’t bring a bunch of clothes, and that she was fine with what she had on. Tracey stared at her for a moment then finally grunted, “Come on.”

At dinner, they laughed and talked and Renee, loving being dressed up and out dining with Tracey, twirled her hair, flirting with him. Tracey stopped Renee in the middle of her sentence and said, “Come here” as he repeatedly curled his index finger as if to draw her close to him. Renee, sitting across the table from him, scrunched up her face as if to ask “What?” This only prompted Tracey to continue curling his finger. He leaned in over the table and whispered, “Come here. I wanna tell you somethin’.” So Renee pushed her plate aside and leaned in over the table as well. Just then Tracey surprised her with a kiss on her lips. Renee was startled and giggled loudly as she blushed. Tracey began eating again with an accomplished smile on his face.

Later that night, back at the hotel, Renee climbed into the plush bed freshly showered and fragrant. Tracey observed her white lace tank top and matching boy shorts. He liked it; she looked innocent and smelled sweet. But he refused to tell her, for he was sure that men constantly filled her head with their admiration. Renee had every intention of honoring her agreement by giving Tracey “some suga” even though she was extremely fatigued. Thus, she was relieved when he said “good night” after giving her a long, hard

kiss. Tracey turned away from her not wanting to seem too anxious. Renee, seeing that he was not going to even cuddle with her, turned away as well, pulling the blanket over shoulder. Uncertainty kept her awake until she heard Tracey snoring.

The next morning, Renee noticed that her period started. She was a bit worried that Tracey would be upset, as a result, if he wanted to have sex later that night. She took some painkillers and stood in front of the mirror pleased with her outfit. She wore another long, navy blue, sleeveless maxi-dress with a plunging neckline. Her lashes were long and her lips glossy. She thought she looked very sexy. However, she exited the bathroom feeling a little reluctant, as she was unsure if Tracey would think she was overdressed again. But Tracey did not make mention of his disapproval or his approval, for that matter, so Renee was left to wonder. He never told her that he liked the way she wore her hair or that he loved her perfume or that she was pretty. In fact, no man had ever really genuinely complimented her and unbeknownst to Tracey, it would have meant so much to her if he had. Just like her girlfriends, Tracey assumed that Renee was an extraordinarily strong and independent woman. And she was, but only because she had to be. She would love to be able to lean on a man, from time to time, and not always have to be brave. But, she would rather wait on the right man to open up to, to share her vulnerabilities and secrets of her heart with. She didn't want to waste her time and her energy on someone who didn't want to do the same with her, someone who didn't truly value her. After all, she felt like she deserved a man who could appreciate her worth and love and accept all of her complexities. She was waiting for a man with exquisite taste.

The couple spent the day at the mall, where they ate lunch and browsed the shops. Tracey told her to pick out a couple of dresses. Renee was delighted at the idea of being treated to new clothes. But something didn't feel right. She couldn't help but to think of what else his money could do for her other than buy clothes. For, the very next day she would be back at home with a non-working refrigerator.

"Tracey, the hotel and dinner and even lunch today was more than enough," Renee said with a genuinely grateful smile. "I don't need to get a new dress...really."

"If I wanna buy my ladybug a new dress, then let me do that all right?", Tracey said smiling.

Renee returned an unenthusiastic smile.

"What's wrong, baby? I thought you'd like a little shoppin'." Tracey was confused.

"I do! I really do. It's just that I kinda feel like if you wanna spend some money on me, then it ought to go for what I need instead of what I want."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember I told you that my refrigerator was acting up? Well, now it's full on broken. So, I have no refrigerator when I get back."

"Why don't you just tell your landlord to replace it?", Tracey questioned.

Renee laughed. "Tracey, it's not like. They don't give you appliances in California like they do here. I had to buy that refrigerator from a used appliance store. Here, they give

you microwaves, refrigerators, dishwashers, washer dryer hookups *in* the apartment.” Renee continued to laugh. “I was lucky to even get a stove!”

“How much is it gonna cost to fix it?”

“\$200.” Renee felt a little ashamed. She didn’t want Tracey to think that she was asking him for \$200. She didn’t want him to think that she assumed he was going to spend that much on new clothing for her either.

Tracey contemplated for a moment. “All right, well get yourself just one dress and I’ll give you the money for the fridge.”

“You will?”, Renee exclaimed, with a big grin on her face. She was very appreciative and glad that she didn’t have to feel guilty now as she tried on dresses. Renee found a few that she really liked, but she wanted to keep the cost low for him. She finally settled on a printed, halter sundress that fell to her knee. Tracey liked that it was shorter and more revealing than the dresses he’d seen her in. He thought it made her look less high maintenance.

They drove back to Tracey’s apartment in Montgomery for their last night together before Renee left the next afternoon. After Tracey showered, he scoured his movie collection for ones that he thought Renee might like. She finally came out of the bathroom wearing a white, cotton T-shirt that was damp from her wet, perfumed body and oversized men’s basketball pants. She was especially sleepy after having taken some more painkillers for her cramps. They lay in his bed like two strangers while watching an unmemorable movie. Suddenly, Tracey said, “Why you got those pants on?”

“What?”, Renee, half asleep, looked over at him.

“What you wearin’ men’s pants to bed for? I don’t wanna see that!”

Renee was both stunned and irritated. She couldn’t figure out what the big deal was. She was comfortable and didn’t feel like wearing cutesy lingerie while she was feeling bloated and cramping. Besides, he didn’t remark on what she wore the night before, so she didn’t think he cared about what she wore to bed.

“Oh my goodness, what’s wrong with them? They’re my brother’s pants.”, she said as she looked at Tracey’s seriously displeased face. “He let me borrow them when I was out here for Christmas, but I just kept them because they’re so comfortable.”

“You not a man. Don’t be wearin’ men’s clothes to bed with me.”, Tracey ordered as he looked straight at the TV.

Renee shifted herself a little bit feeling uncomfortable and perplexed.

Just then, Tracey turned the TV down and started kissing her. All she could think of was the rustling sound of her pants as he kissed and grinded himself on top of her. He began to tug on her pants in an effort to get them off. He was annoyed that she didn’t lift up her hips to help him. It was clear that he wanted more than a kiss.

“Tracey, we can’t. I’m on my period.”

Tracey stopped kissing her.

“I know.”, Renee said, feeling sorry for him.

“So what, I don’t care about that. It’s your last night, a little blood ain’t gonna stop me.”

In disbelief, Renee’s eyes widened. She immediately thought that he was nasty. She had never had sex on her period before. Renee became more dismayed thinking about it as Tracey put a condom on. ‘It will be gross and smelly; this is so unnecessary,’ she thought. Moreover, she had a notion that she had previously heard that there was a reason why people should not have sex while a woman was menstruating, but she couldn’t think of what it was. Her thoughts were interrupted by Tracey’s voice. “Do you want me to turn the lights off?”

“Uh no, that’s all rright. It doesn’t matter to me.”, Renee distractedly said.

“Do you want to take your panties off or want me to just move them to the side?”

‘More questions?’, Renee thought. She was completely irritated now. She could not think of the reason that she shouldn’t have sex on her period. “I’ll just take them off.” As soon as she got them off, Tracey thrust himself inside of her. Renee was not receptive at all. There had been no foreplay and she was agitated, the combination of which made her experience a very painful, long-lasting horror. Tracey stopped periodically because Renee groaned in agony with every passing second, longing for it to be over. It had been almost ten years since she had sex; her legs were shaking profusely. The pain was unbearable and she wondered if it was the very reason she was thinking of.

When Tracey was finished with her, Renee went to the bathroom to recuperate. She returned with a change of plans. “Tracey, I’m not feeling well. I’m just gonna stay at my mom’s tonight.”

“Are you sure? You know you can stay here and I can take you back in the morning like we planned. I promise I won’t mess with you anymore tonight. Lay down here ‘til you feel better.”, Tracey said, as he patted the bed.

His promise didn’t surprise Renee. ‘That had to be the worst sex he ever had in his life,’ she reasoned. Renee didn’t even care. All she could think of was that she would never have sex while menstruating again. “No, I’m just gonna go on over there tonight and get some sleep.”

“All right then, give me a minute.”, Tracey grabbed his pants and headed to the bathroom. He proceeded to clean himself at the sink with the door wide open. Annoyed, Renee put her shoes on and gathered her purse and overnight bag. She was glad to be leaving.

As they drove, Tracey told her that he had a good time and she thanked him for a great weekend. Then she remembered and blurted, “Tracey! I forgot to get the money for my refrigerator from you back at the house!”, Renee was disappointed. She really needed it fixed.

“Oh, that’s right.”, Tracey was turned on by her discouragement. “That’s okay, I can just stop at the ATM up here.”

Renee sighed, “Thank you so much, Tracey. I really need a refrigerator!” Filled with relief, she let out a loud laugh. “You don’t understand, I can’t even grab a cold drink when I want to. It’s been terrible!” With her spirits brightened, she continued to laugh and smile. Tracey gave her the money then carried her bag to her mother’s kitchen door. They kissed and she promised to call as soon as she got home. Renee took the best shower she had had to date and fell fast asleep.

A few months later, Tracey decided that he would visit Renee in California. He liked talking to her on the phone a lot. She was a good listener and she was always positive and encouraging. It would be cool to see her, but he had plenty of money saved and liked the idea of bragging to his friends that he was going to travel to California. Renee agreed and told him that it was a great idea to travel somewhere he’d never been, plus she was excited to take him to see all of the tourist sites in Hollywood and wherever else he wanted to go. But she was so overwhelmed financially that she told him she didn’t think it was the right time for a visit. She wanted to be able to have food stocked in her newly working refrigerator for him and buy things she thought would make his weeklong stay comfortable. But she didn’t have extra cash for gas to be his tour guide or for anything else.

“Tracey, I just think if you wait a couple more months it would be better. I’m just kinda stressed out over here right now.”

“You don’t want me there?”

“What? Yes, you know I do. It’s just that I...I just...”

“What Renee? Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Tracey, I got myself in a mess with these payday loans I got out. I’m running out of money to pay them. One of them put the check through and it bounced, now I have to pay a returned check fee to the bank *and* to them and I got two more out and I can’t pay those, plus my regular utility bills and gas, gas is getting higher and higher....”

“Renee!”, Tracey hollered.

She immediately stopped, unaware that she was rambling. She let out a fake laugh. “Oh, my bad.”

“Girl, you need to slow down.”, Tracey said playfully. He was in a good mood. He got the days off from work that he requested and nothing was going to stop him from going to California. “How much do you need to take care of the loans?”

Renee let out a deep sigh. “You won’t believe how much... \$2,500. And I just don’t know how I’m gonna pay that. It’s so much money and I just can’t. I can’t. I

don't know what I'm gonna do." Renee had been beyond stressed for weeks. She was depressed and constantly worrying about how to get money to pay her bills and her loans.

"\$2,500?!", Tracey grumbled. They each held the phone in silence, while he calculated his money in his head. "Don't worry. We'll figure something out."

Just then, tears flooded Renee's eyes. The moment Tracey said "we'll", her heavy burden was lifted. She cried so much that her words were muffled. She was overwhelmingly touched by his inclusive verbiage. She had never been a part of a "we" before and it felt wonderful. Instantly, she was no longer alone. Someone in the world had just taken her into account; had just covered her. In between sobs, Renee informed Tracey that her lunch break was over and that she had to go back inside to work. Tracey hung up the phone realizing that Renee wasn't joking about the stress she was dealing with. He had never heard her cry and he was astounded by everything that she was dealing with on her own. But he would think about her money issues once he got back from California. He just wanted to focus on his big trip and all the places he would go. Meanwhile, as Renee settled back into her cubicle, she reconsidered Tracey. She wondered if he could be what she was missing in her life; if he could be the man that would provide for her, look after her, and give her security and peace of mind.

Three weeks later, Renee flew down the 105 freeway racing to pick Tracey up from LAX. She had just called him and assured him that she would be there in five minutes. But it was going to be more like thirty. She was upset that she was going to be late because she hated having to wait for a ride herself after having flown across country. She always thought that it was such an inconsiderate thing to do to someone to keep them waiting and here she was doing it to him. She had lost track of time rushing around cleaning her tiny apartment and putting groceries away in preparation for his arrival. Renee was joyful with anticipation. She looked forward to cooking dinner for them both and cuddling with him on the couch as they watched TV in the evenings after she returned home from work.

Renee was also excited for Tracey to meet her friends. She planned her very first all-adult party for the following evening so she could introduce Tracey to everyone. She made her girlfriends promise not to bring their children. Every time her friends got together there was at least one that had to bring a kid along. So Renee was anxious for the opportunity to act grown up like the girls on *Sex in the City* and drink wine and flirt with their boyfriends. She finally had one to bring to the shindig and she wanted it to be perfect. Renee got one of Kenya's friends to agree to let her have an outdoor barbeque at her apartment complex, because there was a loft there, already equipped with both a barbeque and bonfire pit. Renee was pleased; she couldn't have picked a more intimate, mature place to have her party. She was eager to have her friends finally meet her real-life, bona fide boyfriend.

When she arrived at LAX, Tracey was surprised to see Renee in a car that was not old and barely running. He had assumed that since she couldn't afford to fix her refrigerator and lived off of payday loans, that she would have a raggedy car. He got in with luggage and about five books.

"What are those books?!", Renee asked.

“This guy came up to me and asked if I was from here and I told him that I had just came in from Alabama, and then he showed me a bunch of books he was sellin’. So I bought these.”

Renee couldn’t believe what she was hearing. She glanced at the books as she drove. One was a book on mythology, another was a book of photos of buffalo and another was a food journal book. ‘Did some bootleg dude scam him into buying books of all things?’, she thought. She was a little turned off.

They arrived to her apartment and again Tracey was caught off guard by Renee’s décor. Indeed, it was a small apartment, but it was neat and clean and was adorned with printed couch pillows and pretty artwork that hung on the walls and a large area rug. It was very cozy and inviting. His stunned expression made Renee feel as though he expected her to have pots under her facets to gather leaking water and an outhouse. Later that evening, after settling in, Renee suggested that they walk a couple of blocks to Baskin Robbins for dessert. Tracey agreed, feeling like her foreign idea of actually walking to the store was adventurous. Renee enjoyed walking with him, talking over ice cream with him and rounding out the night sleeping with him.

The next day Renee took him sightseeing in Hollywood, where he bought souvenirs for his friends, mom, sister and niece. Then they went to Venice Beach and ate tacos, as they walked along, observing the many eccentric people and shops. Later, as they headed back to Long Beach to get ready for the much anticipated barbeque, Tracey asked Renee to take him to a barbershop to get his goatee trimmed. Renee remembered a barbershop that Kenya took her son to and drove him there. She pulled up to the front and told him that was going to go browse in Target down the street and she’d be back. But Tracey noticed the cluster of young black men dressed in khaki’s and white T-shirts loitering around the shop, and a the guy selling cd’s out of his truck nearby and told Renee to come inside with him. Renee was flabbergasted. ‘He’s scared. This buff, tough, manly, cornroll wearing man is scared of a few teenage boys,’ she thought. Renee was unimpressed.

“What? I’m gonna be bored in there. It looks like there’s a wait, too.”

“But, I don’t know this hood, girl. I got this red UA shirt on...nah, you coming in with me.”

Renee couldn’t help but to laugh out loud. She knew that he couldn’t be serious. That whole wearing the wrong color thing was so outdated in Renee’s mind and on top of that they were definitely not in the ‘hood’. Sure, they were in a strip mall that contained a black-owned barbershop, an Asian owned beauty supply store, a wing eatery, a liquor store, a payday loan store and a Laundromat. But Renee would certainly not categorize this Long Beach area as the hood; not to say that Long Beach didn’t have its share of ‘hoods’ like most cities, but this wasn’t one of them.

“Tracey, it’s fine. Your shirt is fine. This isn’t Compton back in the day.”, Renee said teasingly. “Besides, if something went down I can’t do anything.” She continued to laugh.

Tracey didn't care if she laughed. He told her to park and go inside with him. Renee was perturbed. She didn't want to go inside and be the only woman sitting around in a barbershop waiting for Tracey to get groomed. It was a guy thing and she would have been happy not to be a part of it. She sat there, smiling unenthusiastically, as she listened to Tracey and the men talk about college football. She was trapped, bored and impatient and her excitement over the barbeque was beginning to wane. They finally left and Tracey felt puffed up from the easy and friendly interaction he encountered in the barbershop. Renee rushed home to shower and dress for the party.

Renee and Tracey arrived at the outdoor loft just as the sun was setting. Kenya and her man, Ryan, and the other two couples were already there. The guys stood near Ryan as he tended to the meat on the grill, while the ladies sat around the fire pit talking loudly over the blaring music. Renee introduced Tracey to everyone and they all returned welcoming smiles. Ryan offered Tracey a beer and whisked him away to settle the debate he was having with the guys over the best way to marinate meat. Renee shook her head happily and joined her friends. She'd forgotten her earlier disdain for him as she gazed at her very own boyfriend with the guys. She was finally just like the rest of the girls, and no longer the odd one out.

They were all having lots of fun enjoying each other's company, music and food. Renee's friends were happy for her because she looked happy. But as the night progressed and Tracey continued to guzzle beer, things began to change. He started getting more and more boisterous, which made Ryan skeptical. Renee was becoming concerned, as she had never seen him drunk before and was a little embarrassed that he was being so irresponsible around people he didn't know. Kenya assured Renee that his behavior was okay, but she knew Renee was not convinced. She knew that Renee wanted the party to run smoothly and successfully and from the look on her face, she knew that Renee didn't think it was.

"Girl, I think it's time to for us to go.", Renee told Kenya disappointedly.

"Renee, don't be upset. He probably jus' nervous 'cause he's out of his element, that's all.", Kenya consoled her.

"I don't give a damn. That's wack.", Renee was getting increasingly agitated. "How you gonna get around folks you don't even know, my *friends*, mind you, and you gon' act a fool!" They stood there in silence on the other side of the loft, away from the others for some privacy. Kenya didn't know what to say. Renee's face now had an expression of defeat. "I would never do that. I would never get around his people and show out like that," she shook her head, "it's just not cool."

"Girl, I'm sure he don't mean to embarrass you. He jus' tryna be cool."

Just then, Renee looked over in Tracey's direction to see what he was doing but she didn't see him. She walked over to Ryan, who was busying himself by looking through the collection of cd's on the table, and asked where Tracey was.

"He took off with Shay's dude.", Ryan explained.

"What?" Renee quickly turned toward Shay, Kenya's friend, and asked where they went.

“Man, ain’t no telling where that fool went.” Shay slurred unconcerned. She didn’t even really know her party companion well. He was just her latest boyfriend; she considered it a long relationship if it lasted more than three weeks.

Renee was livid. She was beyond embarrassed and extremely puzzled. She sat speechless; while Kenya sat in Ryan’s lap, giggling, and Shay described the sex position her new boyfriend liked best to her friend. After about thirty minutes, Tracey returned to the loft. Shay asked him where her boyfriend was and Tracey told her that he took off after he let him test drive his turbocharged rental car. Shay started cursing and complaining loudly to her friend. Renee, still upset that Tracey left her at the party she orchestrated in his honor without saying a word, remained quiet. Then, Tracey abruptly turned around to exit the loft and yelled, “Come on woman!” At that moment, Renee became enraged and felt belittled and ashamed by his rambunctious order. She felt a volcanic urge to run after him and publicly cuss him out. But she quickly remembered that he was staying at her apartment for the next few days. She reasoned that if she would have acted on her emotions negatively, then he’d have to leave immediately and he had nowhere to go. She chose to keep the peace in order to deal with him for the next three days until his return flight departed.

Ryan looked at Renee as if to ask, “Do you want me to go handle him for you?” Renee glanced at him sorrowfully, declining his offer. Kenya was devastated for her friend; she knew how excited Renee was for her to meet Tracey. “Renee,” Kenya said, regretfully. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah girl, let me just get out of here. I’ll call you tomorrow,” Renee sadly replied, as she waved goodbye to everyone and walked down toward her car, where Tracey, burly and drunk, was waiting. She pressed her keychain to unlock their doors and climbed in without speaking a word to him the entire drive back home. Instead, she drove along, fuming, as Tracey boasted about how fast his new friend’s car was and what a cool guy he was. He told her that the guy might pick him up the next day while she was at work and show him around some other places. Late that night, when Tracey rolled over on top of her, Renee lay there feeling completely let down. She realized as she allowed Tracey to have sex with her that he was not the provider, protector and comforter that she thought he might be.

The next morning Renee sat on the freeway in heavy traffic during her commute to work. She called Kenya on the phone and expressed her grief. “Kenya, no lie, when he summoned me like a caveman and I had to walk the walk of shame to my car, I felt like a woman in a Lifetime movie!” Kenya laughed, but Renee wasn’t joking. She knew it sounded ridiculous, but there was no mistaking that she felt like a battered woman.

“It’s over,” Renee said solemnly.

“What?”, Kenya replied. She knew Renee had been thinking more seriously about Tracey and a possible future with him. Although, she wasn’t exactly too surprised, for she had a feeling that Renee wanted it to work with Tracey mostly because she was feeling anxious about turning thirty, unmarried and childless. From all the stories Renee told Kenya about Tracey, she never really felt like he was her type. And after last night, she was convinced that he was definitely not a match for her friend.

“No, I’m serious. I can’t imagine being married to someone like him anymore. I mean I would hate it, I swear. I couldn’t wait to leave for work. Don’t you know that I got up extra early just to cook him some breakfast? I cooked the bacon, and realized that I didn’t have eggs. So I walked across the street to the market to get ‘em.”

“Uh huh.”, Kenya chimed in to prove that she was listening attentively.

Renee continued, “And when I got back he was raising his voice, criticizing me for making bacon with no eggs. I tried to tell him that that was why I went to the store and told him that I was gonna make some for him. But he just started complaining about how the bacon was cold now and I said I’d just heat them up in the microwave and girl, he was all saying he didn’t like his bacon reheated, so I was just bump it, I’m out and I left.”

“Did you cook the eggs?”, Kenya asked.

“No!”, Renee shouted. “Girl, after all that going back and forth I had to go. I wasn’t about to be late over no eggs. I mean, damn, he shoulda been glad that I got up early to cook anything for him. Girl, I was so pissed.”

Kenya felt sorry for Renee. She had really hoped that Tracey’s visit was everything Renee wanted it to be. She didn’t really know what to say to Renee because she knew how excited she was to play house for the first time. Kenya was bummed that Renee was experiencing more reality than fantasy.

“Well, girl, don’t get all upset and get yourself in an accident.”, Kenya warned. “He was probably hung-over or woke up on the wrong side of bed or something. Just get to work and don’t think about it. When’s he leaving again?”

“Thursday, on the red-eye.”

“What are you gonna do tomorrow for his birthday?”, Kenya was curious now that she knew Renee could care less about it.

“I was just gonna make a cake for him and I thought we could go to dinner somewhere, but I dunno, girl. I mean, it’s sad that I’m dreading going back home tonight, at this point. That’s crazy.”

“It’ll be fine, Renee. It’s only a few more days.”

“Yeah,” Renee agreed, halfheartedly. “All right, I’m at work now, so I’ll call you later.”

“Ok. Cheer up!”, Kenya yelled as Renee was hanging up the phone.

That evening was the first time Renee was ever thankful for sluggish LA traffic.

Although Renee was tired when she got home from work, she wanted Tracey to have a nice birthday and was prepared to attempt to show him a good time. He agreed to go to dinner and proceeded to shower for the outing. Renee immediately got to work on

baking his birthday cake. When she stopped her hand mixer, she heard Tracey yelling her name.

“Yes?”, she yelled back, as she made her way to the bathroom.

Tracey’s head peered out of the door. “Iron the shirt on the bed.”

Renee stood motionless as he shut the door. She didn’t like his tone. It wasn’t that she minded ironing his clothes; she only minded ironing his clothes now that he was acting like a jerk. Nevertheless, she went back into the kitchen to pour the cake mix into the pans and into the oven, and then proceeded to iron his shirt. When Tracey was done showering, he went into the bedroom and saw the crisp ironed shirt on the bed. “You should have hung the shirt up afterward,” he said, with a raised voice so she could hear over the noise of her washing dishes. Renee closed her eyes and exhaled long and hard. Soon he was dressed and sitting on the couch watching TV. Renee went into the bedroom to change her clothes for dinner. She sat on the edge of the bed for a moment trying to think positive thoughts to help her get through the night. She comforted herself by thinking that she was doing a good deed for him. After all, it was his birthday and she wanted him to enjoy it. She always thought birthdays were special and that everyone should be celebrated, be counted. With a new motivation, Renee got up and removed her blouse as she stood in front of her full-length mirror. She had just unsnapped her bra when Tracey walked in to grab his shoes. Renee stood there frozen. She watched him in the mirror as she held her bra in place, the straps hanging to the side. Tracey started out of the room, carrying his shoes and just before he walked out, he stopped. He slowly turned around facing Renee’s back, and stared at her in the mirror. They both looked at each other. Finally, Tracey questioned, “What you standing there like that for? It ain’t like I don’t know what you look like.”

Renee, not knowing how to answer, kept standing there waiting for him to leave so she could shut the door behind him and get dressed in peace. But Tracey wouldn’t leave. He continued to stare, as though he was daring her not to remove her bra completely. Renee knew that he wasn’t going anywhere until she stood naked before him. She didn’t want him. Renee was not shy about her body. She knew that it was not perfect, but she figured that just about every human being had at least one or two issues with their body, and she decided to simply accept hers. A few moments later, Renee slowly pulled her bra off; their eyes still locked on one another. Tracey saw her and was satisfied, then left her to herself. Renee finished dressing, feeling defeated. When she walked into the living room, with her purse on her shoulder ready to go, Tracey informed her that he didn’t feel up to going out anymore. He wanted to finish watching the game on TV. Relieved, Renee didn’t argue. She changed into her lounge clothes and iced his cake. Afterward, he refused it when she presented to him, with candles glowing on top. He assured her that he would eat some later. Tired and sad, Renee climbed into bed. A few hours later, Tracey climbed in and nudged her. She woke up and turned over. It was his birthday.

Thursday evening Renee picked Tracey up and took him to purchase a few more souvenirs. She was in a joyful mood knowing that soon she would be rid of him. After eating burgers at In & Out, she drove him to LAX and stopped at the curb near his departing gate. He got his bags out of the back, and soon realized that she wasn’t getting

out of the car to give him a farewell hug or kiss. So he leaned in, and she begrudgingly kissed him on the lips, said goodbye and sped down the freeway with her music blaring and a new sense of freedom.

The next day Renee noticed the uneaten birthday cake and enjoyed a slice. That night Tracey called, and told her that he had made it back safely and how much everyone liked their souvenirs. Renee listened as the strained, one-sided conversation went on. Finally, Tracey said he'd call her the next day. A couple of days later, he called and she didn't answer. Then, the following week Tracey called again and after a few brief moments, Renee gave him an excuse to get off of the phone and told him she would call him back. She never did. Tracey understood and stopped calling.

Now thirty-two years old, Renee felt depressed and unaccomplished. She had no husband, no kids, no house and no savings. She just wanted more, more of everything. She wanted a soul mate; she wanted to feel a deep love. She imagined the epitome of love was illustrated in the song, *Adore*, by Prince, in which he indicates that he wants to be more than his love interest's mother and brother. Renee wanted to love a man in such a way that he felt like family. But her most immediate and pressing concern was to be financially stable. She wanted to be able to effectively take care of herself. She figured if she could make enough money to pay her bills, and have a little left over for fun, then she could get out in the world and meet a great guy. But all her jobs seem to only be enough for her to get by, which depressed her to the point where she had no desire to dress up and flirt with random guys. She was convinced that something was missing and thought maybe a church could tell her what that was. She visited several and was not impressed. She was aware that she was not seeking a church to entertain her, but she just hadn't found the right one yet. Renee figured that she would know the right church when she found it. A few times Kenya accompanied her, which only gave her a reason to suggest they leave early and go sit and talk in Starbucks instead.

Renee knew there had to be a purpose for her life. 'This couldn't be it,' she thought, 'There has to be more to life than this.' She was beyond exasperated with working at a job that paid her less than she owed, as well as being single. Renee didn't know how to change her life, but she was thoroughly convinced that it needed changing.

One evening, on her commute home from work, Renee called her older sister to chat, while stuck in traffic. They were the only siblings living in California and yet they rarely saw or talked to each other. Renee had always been disturbed by their relationship. It just wasn't right, but she didn't know how to make it any better. She resolved to simply never stop trying, for they would always be family and she was going to love her sister no matter what. The conversation was typically abrupt and distant. And as usual, when Renee hung up the phone she felt deeply saddened by their lack of closeness.

She finally arrived home after battling motorists during a fit of road rage. She was completely stressed out and hungry and wanted nothing more than to get in front of her TV with a healthy, frozen personal pizza. Before going inside to her comfy couch, Renee pulled out a piece of paper that was stuck between the bars of her screen door. It was a notice that her rent would be increased again, for the third time in two years. Not having a lease was attractive to Renee when she first moved into the apartment because she knew it could be costly to get out of them prematurely. But she never expected that this would only give her landlord license to raise her rent anytime she wanted to. Renee

knew that she was not going to have an extra thirty-five dollars next month. She walked into her dark apartment, locked the door and wailed on her couch all night long.

The next evening, sitting in her car during rush hour, Renee had made her mind up. She was going to move to Atlanta. She immediately called her younger sister who lived in Montgomery and told her that she wanted to move in with her until she found a fabulous job in Atlanta. Her sister was so excited and knew that she'd see Renee very soon, because once Renee put her mind on something, she was all in. Renee also called Kimtrel to give her the news. Kimtrel was happy for her and eager to see what Renee was going to accomplish. She wanted her friend to be happy and so did Kenya. But, although Kenya supported Renee's decision, she was saddened at the thought of losing their friendship.

"Who am I gonna meet at Starbucks to give me pep talks and what kinda social life am I gonna have if I can't come to all your cute little parties?", Kenya groaned.

Renee laughed cheerfully, "Now, girl, you know I'm just gonna be a phone call away and I you can come and visit!"

"Yeah," Kenya mumbled.

"And, of course, I'll be flying back here all the time. It'll be fine," Renee was beaming.

Kenya smiled at her and shook her head. She hadn't seen Renee this happy in a long, long time. "Yeah it will. You gonna go out there and find a good 'ol Southern man and be popping out babies in no time."

Renee laughed, "Well, I don't know about all that 'cause they say that Atlanta is the gay black man's heaven, but I don't care. I guess I'll be making me some gay friends then because I love Atlanta. It's like a black Hollywood. They've got everything there just like here. It's the best of both worlds. You got all the fabulousness of city life, great restaurants, plays, festivals and then you got the down home feel where folks still have manners." The friends laughed, both hoping for the best.

The following Monday, Renee pranced into work with her nails painted red and her hair newly relaxed and curled. As she entered the break room to heat up the coffee she bought earlier, her coworker, Chad, was exiting. He grinned and said, "I see you got your mojo back."

Renee was taken aback and blushed. She noticed his tallness, his perfectly messy, beach blonde hair and his sparkling gray eyes. He lingered next to her for a moment before leaving. Then he said over his shoulder, "You look nice," and turned back to give her a final look of approval. Renee liked his attention and was amused that he seemed cuter to her all of a sudden. She thought that it was a shame she hadn't noticed before especially since she was going to give her boss her two weeks' notice that very day.

She told her boss that she needed a brand-new, fresh start; that moving to the South was the only way that she would ever be able to buy a house. "I just can't keep paying rent just so my crazy landlord can raise it anytime she wants."

"I understand," her boss said, nodding. She was about Renee's mother age and very pretty. She operated an open door policy and had always been a kind and flexible boss. "You'll probably find your husband there, too!"

Smiling Renee said, "Yeah, that would be nice if there are any good men left."

"Oh, there are, don't worry about that."

"I dunno. I just wanna have some fun and be happy. There's so much more to life than how I'm living it now. I'm bored!", Renee said laughing.

"I'm surprised that you sound restless. I always thought that you had it all together."

"Me?", Renee exclaimed, letting out a loud laugh.

"Yes, you!", her boss confirmed. "You always come to work like you don't have a care in the world. You always look nice, come in, do your work and you get involved with all the office drama these other young ladies do." She now had a slight frown on her face.

"Well, thanks. That's nice of you to say."

"I mean it, Renee. You're a smart, lovely girl and I know that you'll do really well in whatever you get into."

"Aw," Renee said appreciatively.

"Now, go on and get back to work and make sure you come into my office on your last day so I can pray for you travelling all that way."

Renee was touched. "I will."

A couple of weeks later her dad, Maury, and her youngest brother drove to California to help her pack and drive her back to Alabama. After they spent a day visiting family and friends, it was time to head back. Renee stuffed her SUV with the smaller things that she was taking, while her dad and brother moved the larger items onto a small U-haul truck. Her sister, Lana, stopped by to see their dad and to wish them safe travels. She kissed Renee, gave her a card and was off. It was a sentimental card encouraging Renee to go after her dreams and complimenting her beauty and intellect. Renee became emotional and called her and thanked her. Their conversation was short and sweet and Renee was content.

While her dad and brother were finishing up, she asked if they wanted anything from McDonald's; they declined. She sat in the long drive-thru line after ordering a small coffee. Renee busied herself by daydreaming about her bold, permanent move. Each time she moved before, she never expected to stay put forever, but this time she was moving for good. She wanted to leave behind feelings of sadness, loneliness and unfulfillment. 'This time there will be no turning back, because all will be well,' she thought. She imagined herself living an adventurous life, filled with good friends and good times. She couldn't wait to land a high-paying, rewarding job so that she could dine in fabulous restaurants and go to plays and exhibits at the museums and see all that there was to see. She was convinced that in a city like Atlanta, there was no way that she

would be unfulfilled.

Renee had a bit of a headache and reached into her purse for her water bottle and swallowed a painkiller. She finally inched forward in the drive-thru. Normally, Renee would have been impatient and antsy due to the unusually long wait, but the sun was shining and life was full of new possibilities. Just then, the car directly in front of her caught her eye. It was a newer, midnight blue Honda with a baseball cap that read 'Obama' on display in the back window. Renee caught a glimpse of the driver in his side mirror. He was a black male, with a cap and sunglasses on. When he reached out to exchange his money for food, she noticed his glistening watch. As she continued to sit in the drive-thru, she wondered what could be the issue. The wait was ridiculously long. Suddenly, the Honda pulled off and Renee offered her dollar to the young cashier who handed her the coffee.

"Thank you, come again."

"Wait!", Renee called out. "I haven't paid you yet."

"The guy in front of you already paid for it."

"What?"

"That guy paid," the cashier said pointing to the Honda slowly merging onto the street. "He asked what you ordered and I said coffee and he was like, 'that's all?' and I said yeah, so he said 'lemme get that for her'."

"Mmm," Renee murmured, surprised. "Wow." No stranger had ever surprised her with unexpected, unearned kindness like that before. She thanked the cashier and sped off honking at the Honda in an attempt to thank him, but he had already driven through the intersection. At that moment, she felt as though a light was turned on inside of her, and she drove back to meet her dad wondering if what she had just experienced was an omen to a bright future.

A month after moving into her sister's apartment, the optimism Renee had began to diminish. She had prescribed herself a good dose of family to cure her loneliness and blues, but shortly after she arrived, the newness of her being around wore off. Everyone got comfortable to the idea of her being around. So it wasn't long before a day would not go by without someone, Renee included, coping an attitude about something that offended them. Moreover, Renee hadn't found the perfect job in Atlanta in a day like she thought. She needed money and began to disappointingly look for work in Montgomery. She ended up becoming employed at her sister's job. Things were going fine, for the time being, now that she had some money in her pocket. But it didn't last long, for her sister was getting serious with her long-time boyfriend and they wanted to move in together. So Renee took the first higher paying job that she could find, so that she could afford her own apartment.

She enjoyed having her own space again and a little extra money for fun. One night, Renee, her mother, Nadine, and her younger sister, Cara, went to the movies and decided to go to Applebee's afterwards. Knowing that it was a popular restaurant,

especially on the weekends, Renee snatched her ponytail holder out to let her hair hang down. Dressed in a form-fitting, striped mini-dress and sandals, she and her mother and sister followed the waiter to their table. They passed a large party of about eight people seated in a circular booth in the corner of the restaurant. Renee saw a guy sitting at one end staring at her. She was facing both her mother and sister and the guy's back when she was seated at her table. While they were all putting in their orders, Renee could not help but notice the guy as he put his long legs into the aisle, to deliberately turn and look at her. As soon as the waiter left, Renee made mention of it.

"Oh my goodness," Renee said, trying not to make any obvious facial expressions.

"What?", Cara asked.

"Do not turn around. But there's a guy behind ya'll that keeps staring at me."

"Where?", Nadine asked.

"Right behind you guys in that big booth with all those people sitting there," Renee explained.

"See what happens when you dress like a woman and not a man," her mother said in jest.

Renee had only bought the dress that she was wearing a week earlier at her mother's insistence. She felt much more comfortable in pants because she had gained twenty pounds since that first slice of cake she ate the last time that she saw Tracey. When she had eaten the last slice of his birthday cake, she realized that over the course of three days she had eaten the entire thing. It was downhill from there. Renee had gained weight, little by little, telling herself that she could lose the few pounds quickly and effortlessly. But she never did. Instead, she took comfort in her nightly snacks in front of the TV, and spent whole weekends with pints of chocolate chip ice cream and cheese popcorn. Her emotional eating was not as a result of the end of her relationship with but, rather a sense hopelessness that she felt. She thought she would never find the man for her and have the life she wanted and felt like she deserved.

"I guess, but if a guy is attracted to me, then seems like I'd still be attractive if I was in jeans and a sweatshirt," Renee reasoned.

"Yes, but you don't look available."

"Um," Renee laughed. "Maybe I don't want to look available."

"But you are!", her sister chimed in.

"I know, but I mean I don't want to be attracting guys who are only looking at girls in tight, short mini-dresses. Because we know what he wants and it's not likely to be conversation.", Renee smirked.

"Well, true, but I'm just saying you could stand to look approachable. If you put yourself together, put in a little effort, guys will respond like this one is," her mother said. "You usually dress like you're already taken, like a soccer mom or something."

“Yeah, you do dress like a librarian sometimes,” Cara stated.

Renee let her jaw drop dramatically, pretending to appear shocked and offended and they all laughed. But she stopped abruptly when she saw the guy stand up and trade places with a woman who was sitting at the other end of his booth. Renee was not pretending to be shocked now. She couldn't believe what he had just done. They were now both in full view of one another. He continued to stare at her while he sipped his drink. His blatant attention caused Renee to feel a strange excitement, but she was wary and visibly uncertain.

“What's wrong?”, her mother asked detecting the look on her daughter's face.

In a low whisper she said, “Oh my goodness.”

“What?”, her sister said, instantly irritated by the suspense.

“This man straight got up from his seat and traded places with a lady so he could face me.”, Renee stated, almost inaudibly.

She was amused and in disbelief. No one had ever stared at her like so intently and so prolonged before. This only prompted her mother to turn around to get a glance at him. She was enjoying the anticipation. Renee sat there tremendously embarrassed, while her mom and sister laughed and made mischievous, playful noises. She did her best to ignore them and act normal as she continued to eat her food. A few minutes later, she saw two men at the booth wave goodbye to the rest of the group and leave the restaurant. Renee assumed that they were all coworkers out for happy hour. Then suddenly, the man stood up and began walking toward Renee's table. She was feverishly stunned and she immediately hung her head and quickly focused her attention to the plate in front of her. But then it impulsively occurred to her that she should just make an uncharacteristic move. And just as the tall, dark-skinned, extraordinarily well-dressed man stood parallel to her table, Renee seductively looked up at him and smiled. He smiled back and proceeded to the men's restroom. Instantly, Renee felt adventurous. Her sister covered her mouth to conceal a scream of approval, while her mother smiled proudly.

Moments later, the man walked passed them again, smiling and nodding at Renee's mother and sister. Renee glanced at him as he said goodbye to all the people that he had been eating with. A couple of the men looked in her direction and grinned before exiting the restaurant. She started to feel a little pressured now that the man had made it a point to stay after all his friends departed, simply to continue pursuing her with his persistent stare. Nevertheless, it was his singular gaze, intended just for her, that made her feel daring and free. Thus seeking to release his self-imposed captivity, and be able to eat in peace, Renee stood up boldly, and quickly walked over to his booth. He looked up at her surprised and giddy.

“Hi, I'm Renee.”

“All right, Renee,” the man said grinning. “I'm Roger.”

Renee chuckled. “Were you gonna sit here until I finished eating?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Roger laughed. “I was going to see if I could get you to stop and talk to me for a minute when you passed by. But you walking over here to me is real sexy. I like that.”

Renee blushed. They exchanged numbers, and he waved at her mother and sister whose eyes were fixed on Renee, before leaving. They were completely taken aback by her unusual behavior and praised her for her boldness when she returned.

After a week of a few phone conversations, Roger invited Renee to his apartment for dinner. She arrived to a clean bachelor pad, filled with the aroma of fried chicken. She sat on the couch, while he served her a tray of hot chicken and French fries that he cooked for them. He brought her a cold drink, and then sat next to her, checking out her red painted toe nails. Later, he brought out a bowl containing a big, warm brownie atop vanilla ice cream, with chocolate syrup drizzled on top. The dessert really pleased Renee because he had taken note when she mentioned that she loved all things chocolate. She sat there feeling mighty special. They spent the rest of the evening filled with anticipation, as they sat very close to one another. Finally, Renee thanked him for a lovely evening and kissed him good night.

The following weekend Renee was back at Roger’s apartment. However, this time the two were exceptionally anxious from all of their raunchy phone conversations. But Roger was aching with lust when Renee, in her knee-length sundress that exposed her big thighs, sat on the couch next to him. Glancing at her subtle cleavage and peering at her knees resting slightly apart, Roger blurted, “You look like you feel good.” Her heart now racing, Renee looked at him as though she were bracing herself to be pounced on. He leaned over and kissed her, while his hand gripped her thigh. He pulled her breast right out of her bra, which was still affixed, and fondled her until he was satisfied. When Renee opened her eyes, she saw Roger on his knees lifting her dress, and then burying his head between thighs. Sex followed and when Roger stood up, Renee began to pull her dress down, but he grabbed her hand and said, “I’m not through with you yet,” as he led her to his bed. When he was through, he jumped up and pulled his pants on and told her that she didn’t have to get up, as he left the room. Moments later she got up and smoothed down her hair and dress. She walked into the living room and found him on the couch watching TV and drinking a soda. Renee grabbed her purse and slid her sandals back on and reached for the door. Roger stood up and held it open for her and smiled. Renee wasn’t sure how to feel, then Roger suddenly kissed her on the lips and said he’d call her soon.

Renee thought it was odd the way Roger left her in the bed immediately after sex, and then basically put her out of his apartment. She didn’t know him well and was unsure if he was being disrespectful or not. She did perceive him to be somewhat vain, but other than that he seemed like a nice guy. She was smitten by his clever conversation more than anything else.

During their next phone call, Renee asked him if he was seeing anyone else. Roger matter-of-factly revealed that he was in love with a woman that he dated about a year prior, who had moved to New Jersey. He stated that he had been trying to persuade her to move back for the past couple of months. The news caught Renee off guard and she realized that she couldn’t even be mad about what Roger said. She had to admit that she should have asked him the question before sleeping with him. But she was very irked by his blasé attitude, which prompted her immediate disdain for him. She felt as though

he spoke to her as if he dared her to have something to say about it. And Renee could not stand a pompous person. She pretended to be completely unfazed about his admission, and ended the conversation by telling him she'd call him later. She had no plans to speak to him again. However, when he called her a week later, after Renee had time to stew in bitterness, suggesting that she visit him on his birthday, she agreed. Renee was determined to redeem herself. If he expected her to be so cool with their arrangement, sleeping together, while he was admittedly in love with another woman, then she would show him cool.

Renee purposefully wore a short sundress and her hair down. She made sure that her legs were glistening with baby oil and that her toenails were painted. She also wore an alluring perfume to entice Roger with. When he opened the door, he saw Renee looking beautiful, holding a homemade birthday cake and balloon. She thought that she was already winning by the surprised look on Roger's face. He eagerly let her in and thanked her for the cake, and went on about how he would have been all alone had she not come by. He was very thankful and later escorted her into his bedroom to show her his appreciation. But before Roger could catch his breath, Renee hopped up out of the bed and put her shoes on. Roger gestured for her to get back in the bed, but she just blew him a kiss, said one final "happy birthday" and walked out the front door. Driving home, Renee felt empowered. Everything had gone according to her plan of revenge. Roger called a few times after that night, and Renee talked to him briefly until one time she finally said, "We're not lovers and we're not friends, so we really don't have anything to talk about." And with that, the conversation ended. Roger never called Renee again.

As usual Renee came up short with her finances. She had stopped all unnecessary, frivolous shopping and did her best to pay her bills on time, because she loathed having to pay late fees. But she never seemed to have more than just enough to get by. She longed for a savings, for a sense of stability. As she got older and saw how her financial status had remained unchanged, Renee was determined to do whatever it took to provide for herself. She commended herself for putting her pride aside and taking on a part-time job. She worked customer service during the day and did data entry three nights a week to supplement her income. And while the extra money helped her pay her bills on time, it did not provide an end to all her financial worries. Renee just could not grasp what was missing in her life, but she felt an enormous void. She was convinced that she was not meant to just work in inbound call centers and rent different apartments all her life. She couldn't fathom living check to check forever, but she saw no end. Renee simply could not figure out how to change her life.

Then one day, as she was driving down the street in tears wondering if she was living the life that she was supposed to be living, she had an epiphany. She needed God. She didn't have the husbands that her friends and sister had nor did she have the fun, jet-setting, wealthy life that her older, entrepreneur older sister had. All she had was a measure of faith; faith that there was more. More of what, she didn't know, but something was telling her that if she found a church-home she would find out. So Renee enlisted her sister to accompany her on her quest to find a church to attend. However, it wasn't long before the sisters found themselves whispering and giggling to one another, more than they were listening to the Word. They made fun of the stuffy songs at one church, criticized the boisterous voice of the preacher at another and left another one

altogether because Renee didn't agree with the pastor saying that a women's glory was her hair. "What about women who have cancer and don't have hair at all?", Renee asked her sister hypothetically. She resolved that she had at least tried to find a church.

One random day on whim, Renee created an online profile on a free dating website. Cara called her and told her that their older sister, Lana, had been urging her to try online dating. Renee was very skeptical about it. She was certain that only nerds and perverts met potential dates online. Renee was convinced that the only way two people could feel chemistry was in person. But she was in favor of her newly separated sister meeting a new man. Renee knew how much Cara missed having a man to go home to every night. Although Cara was still co-parenting her daughter with her ex-boyfriend, she knew that it wasn't the same for her. Cara was experiencing a different kind of loneliness than Renee. She repeatedly told her, "You can't miss what you never had." Thus, Renee felt sorry for her sister and joined Lana in urging Cara to create a profile on a dating website.

"You have nothing to lose Cara. Just do it!", Renee insisted excitedly.

"Mmm, maybe.", Cara responded, reluctantly.

"Oh goodness. I know what your maybe means....no!"

Cara started laughing. "Well, how come you telling me to do it when you never did? All those times Lana was tryna get you to go online, you said you'd *never* do that. Now you want me to? I don't think so. I don't wanna met no crazy dude using a fake picture."

"Okay?", Renee laughed. "Girl, I don't know. I just don't see it. You hear all these crazy stories about how these folks don't really look like their picture or the picture's from like ten years ago!"

"Or they got ten kids by three baby mama's, with no job."

"Exactly!", Renee exclaimed in agreement. She continued to persuade Cara, just in case, she was really considering it. She didn't want to discourage just because she was opposed to it. "But when Lana was tryna get me to do it a couple of years ago she said that she knew a few people who actually got into full on relationships from meeting online."

"Yeah, she told me that she knew people who got *married* meeting online. That's crazy, huh?", Cara asked.

"What? Wow that *is* crazy," Renee hollered, with her eyebrows raised. Suddenly, she really wanted Cara to do it. 'What if?', she wondered. "Girl, you never know. Your husband could be waiting for you to log on right now!"

Cara grunted as she shook her head and rolled her eyes. 'Oh, no, why did I say that? Now she's gonna pull out all her tricks to try to get me to do this, but I'm not,' Cara thought.

“Cara, I’m serious! Just try it. It’ll be fun. I’ll help you pick a picture and write a cute little bio!”, Renee stated eagerly, while Cara rolled her eyes, ready to get off of the phone.

‘That didn’t work,’ Renee realized. “Okay Cara, I’ll do one, too. If I do it, will you?”

“Okay.” Cara replied quickly, hoping that would shut Renee up about it.

“You will?”, Renee yelled, with excitement, completely unaware of Cara’s lack of enthusiasm. “Great!”, she said feeling triumphant. “Okay, so log on while I’m on the phone so we can do it together.”

“Um, my computer hasn’t been working so good lately…”

“Oh, well I can create it for you. My computer is already on,” Renee said and got up from the couch to sit at her computer desk, “So what do you want your username and password to be?”

Cara contemplated making up something to entertain her sister, but then she realized that she would need to pick a picture of herself and she wasn’t going to go that far. She had to think quickly. “Renee, you do it first and then I’ll do one.”

“What? Why, Cara? Come on,” Renee begged, sensing that Cara was trying to back out.

“I will! Just do yours first, so I know for sure that you’re gonna do it, too.”

Renee, never intending on actually creating her own profile, let out a sigh, then finally agreed. “All right, so what should my name be?”

“Hmm, I don’t know, but call me when you’re done so we can do mine. I gotta put Sally to sleep. It’s way past her bedtime.” Cara said, hurriedly. She hung up the phone with a sly smile.

Renee proceeded to create her own profile. Once completed, she began to browse the various messages from men that popped up instantaneously. Three white men separately commented on her beauty, asked where she liked to dine, and told her she was exactly what he’d been looking. Two black men separately asked for her phone number and asked what she liked to do for fun. A few other guys looked too old or too thuggish, causing Renee to laugh out loud. She was amused and entertained, as she continued to browse various profiles of men in her area. Only one caught her eye. His name was Deshawn. Although he was a very good-looking man, it was not his looks that sparked her interest, instead it was his profile. He indicated that he was 6’4”. While his height intrigued her enough to drive her to continue reading his profile, it was the fact that he stated that he liked to read that prompted her to send him a message. She wrote, ‘Hi, what do you like to read?’, and continued browsing several uninteresting profiles until she became bored and logged off. Cara never called back and by the night’s end Renee had forgotten all about her online profile.

The next day, as she was driving down the street on the seedy side of town that she rarely frequented, she noticed the license plate of a brand new, spruced up, all white

Durango in front of her. As soon as she saw “Go Noles” inscribed on the license plate, she instinctively knew that it was none other than Tracey. She remembered that he was a hardcore Seminoles fan and she almost never saw anyone representing a team outside of Alabama. She pulled up alongside of the truck and viewed the side of Tracey’s face. They drove next to each other for about another block before he finally turned his head and looked her way. Just then, a huge smile covered his face and he motioned for her to pull over. Renee followed him, as he turned into an empty parking lot. They both got out and hugged one another.

“Wow, look at you!”, Tracey marveled, for he never expected to see Renee again. “What are you doing here?”

“I know. I’m never over this way, but I’m just coming from a doctor’s appointment...on my way back to work now.”

“No I mean...wait a minute, you moved here?”

“Yeah, about a year ago.”

“What?”, Tracey looked a little disappointed that he was just finding out.

He looked exactly the same, but everything else was different. He divulged that he had moved across town to a bigger apartment on the East side and that he had bought his own truck, and was in the delivery business for himself. Renee told him that she was very impressed and happy for him. Tracey asked for her cell phone number, and she got his too. They both recalled that the numbers were the same. Later that night, Tracey called her and they talked for nearly two hours. He eventually propositioned her for another chance, thinking it might be fate that he ran into her, but Renee said, no. She knew, emphatically, that she would never get back into a relationship with him again. As the conversation went on, Renee revealed how she felt back then. She disclosed how she didn’t even want to return home to him, and how blindsided she felt. Tracey was not all that surprised by her words. He knew that he had been a jerk to her during his visit to California, but he was unaware of just how bad he made her feel. He apologized and excused his behavior on being “young and stupid.” They ended the call feeling good, promising to be friends, and wishing each other well.

After they hung up, Renee lay in bed and checked her emails from her phone. One informed her of unread messages on her online dating account. Getting sleepy, she logged onto the site and opened up about a dozen messages, which included nauseating pickup lines and basic words shamefully misspelled. And then she saw a reply from Deshawn, the only guy that she sent a message to, the only one who interested her. His response indicated that he liked to read ‘any and everything sports-related’, which is not what Renee had expected. She assumed he was referring to literature. She decided to write him back and asked what school he taught at, since he said he was a teacher, and asked how old his son was. Renee went to sleep that night looking forward to Deshawn’s reply.

The following morning, Renee read Deshawn’s response on her way to meet Cara at Starbucks. He informed her that he had a twelve-year -old son that lived in California with his mother and stepfather, and that currently, he wasn’t teaching, but that he had

been a Physical Education teacher prior to being laid off. He also asked for her phone number. Sitting at Starbucks with Cara, Renee he told her that she had met a “decent enough guy” on the website. By now, she knew that Cara tricked her and had no intention of ever creating her own online profile.

“So, yeah, we’ll see. I wrote him back. I wasn’t sure if I should give him my number because he is a total stranger...”

“Um, if a dude asked you for your number in the market or bookstore you’d give it to him, and he’d be a stranger too.”, Cara jumped in.

Renee laughed. “Yeah, I guess so...but I dunno. It’s done now, so if he calls, that’ll be cool,” Renee said, composedly.

“Well, what’s his name?”, Cara inquired.

“Deshawn.”

“Deshawn!”, Cara shouted and began to laugh. “Another Shawn? That’s hilarious.”

“I know,” Renee laughed. “It’s crazy though. Deshawn and Darius are the two names I picked out for my future sons when I was little.”

“Uh, why? Darius is such a ghetto name. You don’t look like you’d have a son named Darius.”

“Whatever. Why not? That’s not a ghetto name,” Renee said, frowning.

“Where does he work? How many baby mama’s does he have?”

“He’s got a son who lives in California,” Renee answered, offering that information first. “And, he was a P.E. teacher, but got laid off.”

“Was? So he’s unemployed?”, Cara asked.

“Uh, yeah, right now he is, but a teacher is dope. I like that,” Renee said, smiling.

Cara made a strange face and Renee just shook her head and changed the subject.

That night Renee stood over the stove, stirring the ingredients in her big red pot, singing over the loud music that was blaring in her apartment. She had been meticulously following a recipe card for chili that she got from the market. Renee loved chili and she loved watching cooking shows on TV. She rarely cooked, simply because she didn’t have to. She could just come home and heat up a frozen dinner and have no mess to clean up. However, she did like to experiment in the kitchen, from time to time, and pretend to be like the ladies on the cooking shows.

As she stirred relentlessly, hoping it would turn out right, the phone rang. It was Deshawn. His voice was deep. Renee liked it. He could hear her smiling through the phone as they talked. After a while, she told him that she was trying to make chili and she was unsure if she should leave the top on or off of the pot. Deshawn told her that when his mother used to make it for them she would leave it on. Renee liked that he paid

attention to his mother and knew a little something about cooking. Not long after, Renee screamed, “oh my goodness! It looks like real chili!”, Deshawn smiled. He liked her unassuming, animated personality. Two bowls of chili and close to three and a half hours later, Renee and Deshawn ended their first phone conversation. She learned that he had one sister and a few brothers, which put him somewhere in the middle like her. He wished for a better relationship with his father like Renee did with Lana. He was smart, and had a witty sense of humor. He told her that he was two classes shy of obtaining his master’s degree in physical education. Even though Renee had once pursued a master’s degree in education, until she decided teaching secondary school was not for her and dropped out, she wholeheartedly encouraged Deshawn to finish, and get his degree. She admired him for going further in his education, and thought that it would be a shame if he didn’t take the two remaining classes.

Deshawn also told her that he grew up poor. He said that the mother of one of his friends always took him along with her and her sons to movies and restaurants, and that she’d been so kind to him, that he referred to her as his aunt. He told Renee that he still visited her and bought her a Christmas gift every year. He shared that his aunt’s actions made him know what type of man he wanted to be. He wanted to be in a position to be extraordinarily good and kind to others just because. Renee could see what an impression the lady left on him and greatly admired her. By the end of the conversation Renee was undeniably smitten.

A few days later, Deshawn came to Renee’s apartment. She was glad to see that he was, indeed, as tall as he said he was, and that he was cute. They both kept smiling during his entire visit. There was no doubt that they had chemistry. They began to have daily conversations that lasted for an average of two hours. They more he revealed about himself, the more she shared with him. They talked about their families and friends. She told him that she wanted to write a book one day, and he told her that he wanted to be a head basketball coach at either the high school or collegiate level. He told her that he had read the bible in its entirety years earlier, which greatly impressed Renee. And she shared with him how unsuccessful her quest to find a church was. Renee told him that she found one that she liked, Divine Truth Baptist Church, and looked forward to attending again the following week, until the pastor said that a woman’s glory was her hair. Deshawn liked that she was seeking a church and suggested that she go back and ask the pastor what he meant by that. Then he referred to something she said in a previous conversation about him finishing what he started in reference to obtaining his master’s degree. Renee was delighted and pleasantly surprised that he remembered. “Why are you so surprised? You told me that you wanted someone to know you.”, Deshawn said, matter-of-factly. Renee was touched that he listened to her. She oftentimes felt like no one really heard her. And she did tell Deshawn that she wanted a man who knew her, really knew her and still loved her.

Three months had gone by, and Deshawn visited Renee at her apartment frequently. They’d spend time laughing and joking, and even slow dancing in the living room. He loved being with her. He thought that she was so independent and positive, but a bit naïve. And Renee adored being with him. She loved the attention and affection he gave her. She felt like she could talk to him about anything. She was falling in love with him, but she didn’t want to. Her brain told her to leave him alone, and kept reminding her that he didn’t have a job and that she wasn’t exactly sure if he had a

permanent place to live. To make matters worse, his ex-girlfriend, who he lived with for five years, called her on the phone to taunt her. The girl would tell Renee that Deshawn spent the night with her after he left her apartment. Renee didn't have a clue how to handle the situation, as she had never experienced anything like it before in her life. Still, her heart wanted him. And he told her that he wanted to do right by her. She saw what a smart, kind, good man he was despite his flaws. And besides...he said it wasn't true.

One night Deshawn was feeling very down and sat sullen on the couch. He pulled her to him as she walked by, burying his head into her stomach as she stood over him caressing it. "You're too good for me," Deshawn murmured. Renee leaned down and kissed his head and said, "No, I'm not. Don't say that." The next night Deshawn ended their daily conversation by proclaiming, "I love you." His words caught Renee completely off guard. She was speechless, wondering if she heard him correctly. No man had ever genuinely told her that before. She didn't know what it was to really love a man. After a few seconds of silence Deshawn said, "You don't have to say anything now. Good night."

A couple of more months passed and Renee and Deshawn had gone out a few times, but mainly entertained themselves by having sex at her apartment. They had sex every time they saw one another. Renee loved sleeping with him, and it seemed to get better and better each time. She was always in a state of bliss when he was there, but as soon as he'd leave, she'd start thinking. She would think about the unwanted, drama-filled calls from his ex, him being unemployed, while she worked two jobs and his shady answers to questions such as, "Who's calling you at 3 in the morning?" She knew that it was unwise to totally fall in love with Deshawn, but she hadn't realized that she had already given him her heart. Every time he'd call she would forget all of these things and repeatedly let him in. But then he would do something to let her down and prove her brain right and her heart wrong. For, it would be left broken after she'd buy his favorite ice cream, cook him dinner, and wait for him in her fragrant, candlelit living room as she looked out of the window, anticipating his arrival, dressed in her new nightgown spritzed with perfume, only for him not to arrive or even call. Renee would have to eventually put the food away, blow out the candles, and regrettably climb into her bed alone.

Working two jobs to pay the bills left little time for Renee to do anything enjoyable. Her evening job was a much more relaxed environment and she didn't feel overwhelmed by juggling both jobs, but she wasn't having any fun. Renee yearned to do things that were enjoyable to her like read books, go to movies, dine with friends, drink wine in vineyards, visit museums and outdoor festivals. She was basically bored. The few friends that she acquired through work, all had families and simply didn't have much time to do all the things she longed to do.

Yet Renee was determined to carve out some fun for herself. She did not want her whole life to consist of work alone. She needed something in her life that would make her smile, and after casually browsing through a college course schedule that came in the mail; she thought she may have found just the thing.

She was enamored with the colorful course options offered in the Masters of Liberal Arts program where she was previously enrolled, while pursuing her master's in education. Reading the various course descriptions of sculpture classes and literature classes excited Renee tremendously. There wasn't a course that she could find that didn't

interest her.

She wanted it all, and was convinced that getting into the program would make her life livelier. It would give her something to actually look forward to. Renee knew it would be a long shot getting accepted into the program, given the four F grades that she received after dropping her education courses, but she felt that she had nothing to lose by trying. So she applied, and the day that the director of the MLA program left her a message to call him back; Renee was very anxious.

When she called back the director, Dr. Silver, expressed reasonable apprehension in allowing her to enter the program. He asked her what area of liberal arts she wanted to study and what she wanted to gain from the program. Renee stated that she wanted to write a book. Dr. Silver explained that although the program was flexible, it was not really designed for writing, but Renee wanted in anyway. She wanted to get into those classes that would open up a big and brand new world to her. Renee told Dr. Silver that the MLA program was better suited for her than the education program, and that she would give her all. He announced that he would grant her entry into the program on a conditional basis. He told her that she would need to essentially make all A's in her classes. Renee didn't think twice about the challenge. She was so elated and downright overwhelmed by Dr. Silver's kindness. She knew that he didn't have to give her a chance, and he didn't stop there. He even had a hand in helping her get financial aid, because the school didn't want to take another chance on her, but because of Dr. Silver's influence, they did.

Renee was both ecstatic and humbled by Dr. Silver's benevolence. She was in awe that someone she didn't even know would go above and beyond to help her. Renee wanted to always remember his unearned, unparalleled kindness, for it was his kindness that incited her newfound desire to do something good for someone simply because she could. Renee wanted to make an impact in someone's life the way Dr. Silver had for her. Once in the MLA program, Renee quit her second job. She needed the time to attend her classes, and the financial aid that she received, supplemented her income. Soon she was able to pay off her SUV and get caught up on all the past due amounts on her bills.

Renee and Deshawn were stuck in an on and off again cycle. They would have periods of time in which they communicated harmoniously, and times of complete, frustrating, thunderous silence. Knowing that Renee was the type of woman who expected a man to work and be responsible and upstanding, Deshawn began seriously looking for work. He had been living off of his savings and odd jobs that he did from time to time for his uncle. But Deshawn knew that he was capable of more. He knew that he could get another teaching job and planned on doing so, but thus far the openings were scarce. He thought that in order to keep Renee he'd have to get a job; any job. But after a while, Deshawn began to feel like Renee didn't believe in him. He thought that she didn't see his value; she didn't know that he was just down and out at the moment and it was only temporary. He was convinced that she could never really love him and that she'd only have time for him until someone better came along.

Therefore, one night while on the phone, he informed her that he was going to move to Atlanta to take a managerial position there. He calculatedly hoped that Renee would tell him not to go, but she did the exact opposite. She was taken aback when he told her his plans; she didn't want him to go, but she couldn't ask him to stay. She felt

that it would have been selfish of her to ask him to stay. They weren't even officially a couple, although she repeatedly slept with him, thinking she must really like him, when all the while, she unknowingly loved him. Deshawn never took the job and their cycle continued.

However, about six months of break-ups and make-ups later, Deshawn had had enough. He felt like Renee didn't love him and he desperately wanted to rid himself of the toxic remnants of his prior tumultuously relationship. He needed a fresh start. So when he finally got two job offers, Deshawn did not accept the job in town, but rather the one located two and a half hours away; away from the drama and rejection that he felt. He decided to stop by Renee's apartment to tell her in person. When he got there she said, "Let's get out of here. We always stay in."

"Where do you wanna go?", Deshawn asked.

"Let's drive to the park and talk."

Sitting in the car at the park, Renee felt her heart sink when Deshawn revealed that he had already secured an apartment, bought two couches and a bed, and would be starting his P.E. teacher and assistant girls' basketball coach position the following week. She tried to play it cool, but inside panic set in. The man that she realized, in that very moment that she loved, had already moved away.

"I had to come and see you," Deshawn said unhappily. "Man, I don't know what kind of hold you got on me!"

Renee couldn't believe her ears. She had no clue that she had a hold on him, and that he had real feelings for her. Although, nice and sweet and funny and loving, he seemed so unstable and unpredictable. She never knew where he was going or who he was with when he left her. His vagueness and habit of standing her up had kept Renee guarded and cautious, but she loved him and hearing that she had a hold on him delighted her immensely.

"I do?", Renee asked, excitedly. "I didn't know that I did!"

"Well, it doesn't matter now."

"Why not?", Renee's smile immediately turned into a frown.

"What do you mean, 'why not?' Because it's too late now!" Deshawn let out a laugh. "I already moved."

"But, I want to be with you," Renee whined, fearing she was losing him forever.

"What...you wanna be my girl?", Deshawn looked at her with a serious expression.

"Yes," Renee declared in a disappointed near whisper. She looked like her six-year-old self being denied a brand new Cabbage Patch doll.

Deshawn shook his head feeling both victorious and gloomy. ‘Why couldn’t we have gotten here before now?’, he wondered, regretfully. “You wanna wait until now to tell me you wanna be with me. You couldn’t let me know before I upped and moved?”

Shocked, Renee cried, “How about you could’ve told me that you were gonna move! You just moved and didn’t tell me anything. You just leavin’!”

Deshawn saw that she was getting emotional and didn’t feel like fighting. With his head lowered he said, “Renee, it wouldn’t work out. I’m gonna be living in a little town two and a half hours away from here. It’s too far. It wouldn’t work. You wouldn’t be able to deal with the distance.”

“Deshawn, don’t say that!”, Renee belted. “Let’s at least try.”

He looked at her unsure of her motives and doubtful that they could make it as a long distance couple. But eventually, with hesitation, he agreed.

The first weekend Renee drove out to stay with Deshawn, he took great care to ensure that Renee was well taken care of. He had his freezer stocked with her favorite frozen pizza meals, took her out to dine for breakfast and dinner and let her loose in her favorite store with a few hundred dollars to spend. While lounging on the couch in his apartment, the couple played footsie under his old, torn, incredibly soft and comfy comforter, which resulted in fantastic sex. They had sex in the morning, mid-day and at night. They tried an array of positions and discovered their favorites. Renee was relieved that he was not kinky. There was nothing that he preferred that she herself did not. They were undeniably sexually compatible. And the more they were together, the deeper their connection got. That Sunday before she headed back to Montgomery, Renee experienced, for the first time, what she was certain to be bona fide lovemaking. Deshawn kissed her as they stared into each other’s eyes and seized one another exceptionally tight, anxiously attempting to be even closer. Their lovemaking seemed to never cease.

Sadly for Renee, as Deshawn became acclimated with his new job and surroundings, it wasn’t long before their conversations became scarce. He was always busy at work or at practice or a game. Renee took it personally and she began to panic. She tried her best to drive out and stay with him on weekends when she wasn’t studying, but many times it just wasn’t feasible. The reality was that she really had to study or write a paper, and he had to coach games and hold practice on the weekend. And when Deshawn wasn’t busy with work on the weekends he would be off somewhere spending his newly made money. It got to the point where he would drive to his mother’s house in the neighboring town to stay for the weekend and pass right through Montgomery on the way back to his apartment without calling or going to see Renee. Consequently, this made her feel insignificant to him. She couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t *want* to see her or at least call and tell her he was going home, for he knew that she relished quality time with him. He felt like she was becoming too clingy. And she was, because she wanted their relationship to work. She overcompensated, while he ended all efforts.

Renee spent countless hours on the phone informing Kenya of the troubling state her relationship with Deshawn was in. She was miserably distressed about it and agonized over trying to find a magic way to fix it all. She held nothing back from Kenya, even telling her that she had recently found out that his online dating profile was still

active. Renee had removed hers right after giving Deshawn her number. She had found what she didn't even know she needed at the time, thus to her, there was no need to keep searching. She wailed and complained to Kenya because she felt that Deshawn had checked out of the relationship long ago. Kenya empathized with her friend and assured her that Deshawn loved her and that he was just being a man, which settled Renee down for a while. But after months of hearing Renee's anxious concerns, Kenya suggested that she might be the problem and not Deshawn. Renee was overwhelmingly offended. She couldn't fathom how she could possibly be the problem and refused to hear anymore of Kenya's nonsense. As a result, Renee wouldn't speak to Kenya for days on end and when she did she was short and elusive. Kenya quickly realized how sensitive and serious the subject of Deshawn was to her. She kept the notion in mind, but because she was her friend she continued to tell Renee the truth as she saw it, only now a little more carefully.

Distraught and sad about her failing relationship, Renee became distracted one afternoon while sitting at her dining room table, writing a paper for class on her laptop. Suddenly, she stopped typing, covered her face with her hands and prayed, 'God please tell me if he is the one. Give me a sign if he's the one or not.' With teary eyes she uncovered her face and composed herself for she had to finish her paper to meet her deadline on time. Just as she began to tidy up her pile of scattered notes that lie on the table, she noticed a page from a coloring book which stuck out from between them. She pulled it completely out, wondering how a fully colored, single page got intertwined with her notes since her niece, Sally, had not been inside her apartment for a couple of months. Renee's eyes immediately became engulfed in tears as she viewed an illustration of an orange haired, brown Jesus, with outstretched arms, wearing a green tunic in front of a yellow halo. It had been confirmed. Deshawn was the one.

Returning to Divine Truth Baptist Church with Deshawn's suggestion in mind, Renee was able to effortlessly overlook the peculiar thing Pastor Hunter said about women's hair, for he was a dynamic preacher. Renee quickly came to realize that there was a lot that she wasn't aware of, such as when she fought with Deshawn, she wasn't really fighting him, but evil instead. Through Pastor Hunter's preaching, she also learned what core values that one should be looking for in a mate. Renee compared these values to Deshawn and was thrilled to see that he possessed many of them. She would often wonder why Deshawn couldn't hear the weekly sermons because she felt like he could truly benefit from them. 'Perhaps, he would see that I have the core values of a good wife,' Renee thought.

Renee resumed bombarding Kenya with virtually everything Deshawn did and every word he said in an attempt to analyze them, because oftentimes he didn't want to discuss anything that would cause him to have to take responsibility. And Renee desperately wanted answers. She wanted to know why she felt like he loved her despite his defiant inexpressive behavior. The more Kenya softly suggested to her that she may need to focus on changing herself rather than Deshawn, the more she began to consider that she might be right. But Renee did not know what to change and how to change it. Thus, on Sunday morning she found herself standing in front of the entire church at the pulpit. During a typical altar call, she became overwhelmed with emotion, remembering how God had made a way for her on countless occasions, and decided to be faithful that

He would do it for her again. She knew that God had to know how badly she wanted a good man, who loved and cared for her, and He had to be aware that she was tired of her mediocre financial cycle. Renee resolved that she needed help. She joined the church and unbeknownst to her found what she had always been missing.

Sometime later, Renee got involved with the women's ministry. Getting up early to attend women's bible study at 8am on a Saturday and even going with the ladies to serve lunch at the Salvation Army really surprised her. She would have never guessed that she would ever do any of these things. But Renee was starting to change. She was beginning to feel purposeful and enlightened. She recognized the little transformations that she was making, and embraced them. Gradually, she switched from listening to the explicit version of music to the clean version. And before long she stopped listening to vulgar music altogether, and mainly enjoyed gospel and R & B. She was not perfect, by any means, but she was a work in progress and she was grateful for the subtle changes in the way she looked at things, particularly her situation with Deshawn. Renee was beginning to feel less defeated and more hopeful and faithful that they would work out eventually.

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." 2 Corinthians 5: 17

Figuring that Deshawn had no intentions of making special plans for her birthday, Renee flew to California for a few days to celebrate with her girlfriends. She, Kenya and Kimtrell, all enjoyed acting like teenagers at a slumber party in her hotel room. They laughed for three days straight. It was the best trip she had taken in a long, long time. However, it ended horribly. Renee's last flight out of Atlanta to Montgomery was canceled due to fog, which meant she'd have to sleep in the airport or find a hotel for the night. She was exhausted from all the fun she had and her long flight from LAX to Atlanta, and wanted nothing more than to get into her cozy bed. She knew Deshawn would probably not be too fond of having to get up and drive the 45 minutes to pick her up, but was certain that he would definitely do it for her just as she would for him. She called, but he didn't answer. She waited, positive that he'd call back. After about 20 minutes, she grew impatient and called her mother, who groggily asked a dozen questions about the flight. Irritated, Renee just told her that she'd be fine and hung up the phone. She didn't even know why she called because she knew Deshawn would be coming for her soon. Renee continued to sit at the gate as more and more passengers disappeared.

Suddenly, Deshawn rang her phone. She jumped up relieved, and explained that he'd need to come and get her from the airport. Deshawn started asking questions. Renee became frantic at the thought the he, too, was trying to get out of picking her up. She was livid and in shock when he finally stated that he just didn't have the money for gas to make the drive to get her. Renee was silent for a moment before she said, "Ok," and hung up the phone.

Devastated, Renee lugged her bags through the empty airport in search of a car rental place. When she arrived at the rental counter, a young Chinese couple with an infant asked her to step over to the side where they were standing. They had seen her at the departure gate earlier and asked her if she wanted to split the cost of a car to get to Montgomery. Utterly fatigued and low on funds, Renee quickly agreed. So she drove a

mini-van into Montgomery with the young Chinese family in tow, and climbed into her bed about three o'clock in the morning.

Two days had passed and Renee was deeply hurt that she had not heard from Deshawn. All she kept thinking about was how if he had called her in the middle of the night needing a ride, she would have been there even if she didn't have gas money. She would have borrowed money from her sister or do whatever she needed to help the man she loved, and she wouldn't have thought twice about it. But the most disheartening part about it for Renee was that he never once called her back to check on her. He simply hung up the phone and went on about his business leaving her to figure it out alone. She thanked God that night for getting her home safely through the thick, blinding fog. She realized that she could always depend on the Lord. But she couldn't depend on Deshawn to care about her well-being, her safety. She thought he loved her. She thought that he was the type of guy she could depend on, one who cared enough to check on her and make sure that she was ok.

Mulling over her disappointment, Renee was compelled to say something to Deshawn. But she wanted to confront him in a progressive way, for she was not the same, sharp-tongued, erratically impulsive woman anymore. Renee decided to email him approximately fifteen scriptures indicating how he should treat others as he would want to be treated. Not even a minute later, Deshawn texted her in response to the email demanding that she not contact him anymore. Renee was fuming. 'He's got his nerve!', Renee thought, not recognizing that her passive aggressive actions were vindictive. She grabbed her phone and called him. But Deshawn was angry and didn't answer. So Renee called again and again until he finally answered.

"What do you want?", Deshawn barked.

Renee was speechless. She couldn't believe that he was talking to her so harshly. He had never raised his voice to her in a rude way before and she felt like crying. "You gonna talk to me rude like that?"

They held their phones in silence. Then Deshawn irritably said, "Renee, what is it? You're so holy now aren't you? What's that about? You sending me a bunch of scriptures. I already prayed and talked to God about that situation. I didn't have the money to come and get you."

"So that's it? Just don't call you anymore? Like I'm some bug-a-boo or something? Like I'm bothering you..."

"It's just not working out.", Deshawn calmly stated.

Renee was stunned that he couldn't see what they could be together. She told him how she got a sign from God that he was the one. And how one day in church she saw a newlywed couple baptizing their baby and how both families were there, and how she knew they could be like that couple someday. Deshawn let her go on and on until he was tired of listening to her ramble on about families at her church and signs.

"You just don't give up, do you? You're weird."

Immediately, Renee’s heart ripped just a little. The man that she loved had just called her a name. ‘He said I was weird,’ she thought. To her, Deshawn confirmed that he didn’t love her for who she was; all of her flaws and complexities included. ‘I’m weird?’, she questioned herself. Drawing on the pride that she often set aside to love him, she composedly informed him that she wasn’t weird. She told Deshawn that it was because of her faith in them as a couple that kept her believing that things would get better. She let him know that she had believed in them; that together they could be powerful and a blessing to their families and so many others.

“Powerful, huh? You think so?”, Deshawn asked, unenthusiastically.

“Yeah...but I guess I was wrong.”

One Sunday after church Renee met her mom, dad and sister at the Waffle House for breakfast. They were all squeezed into the tight booth laughing and enjoying their delicious meals. Renee glanced up when she heard the restaurant door open. She noticed a very pretty, tall woman enter holding a baby car seat with a newborn tucked inside. The mother was followed by a cute toddler boy. Renee gave the lady a slight smile as she and her children settled into the booth adjacent to her. As she proceeded to return her focus back on her breakfast, the door opened again. This time, Renee smirked as the man who entered spotted her and gave her a quick wave before joining the family seated right next to her. Just then, the lady looked over at Renee, who smiled politely and nodded.

“Is that the Applebee’s dude?”, Renee’s sister, Cara, whispered.

Renee’s eyes widened as if to tell her sister to hush, and discreetly nodded confirming her suspicion. At this, they both chuckled quietly and resumed participating in the conversation their parents were having. A while later, as she and her family were waiting on their check, Roger, who had been periodically eyeing Renee as she laughed out loud and gently moved her hair away from her face, got up from his table and headed into the men’s restroom. All of a sudden, Renee felt her phone vibrate and was astonished to see a text from none other than Roger! She gasped looking at his text that read, ‘u know ur ruining my breakfast sitting ova there lookin all sexy.’ Grinning and shaking her head in disbelief, Renee texted him back stating, ‘lol is that right?’ Roger replied, ‘yeah bcuz I can’t think of eating anything else but u!’ She burst out laughing and showed Cara the texts. Moments later, Roger exited the restroom and rejoined his family. Soon after, Renee and her family paid their bill and started for the door. She gave Roger and his wife and children a sweet smile and waved goodbye.

It had been four months since Deshawn told Renee that he didn’t want anything else to do with her. Since then, she tried everything. She mailed him cards expressing how they should try; how when two people find love they should hold onto it and cherish it. She called and texted repeatedly, and each time Deshawn ignored her. Nothing she did or said moved him. Renee became more and more discouraged, but Kenya kept urging her to hang in there and not give up. She knew all about the stress involved in trying to make a relationship work. She and her live-in boyfriend had of their share of

struggles as they raised their children. But after a decade of ups and downs, Kenya and her man were finally getting married. "It's worth hanging in there, Renee," Kenya would constantly tell her. "You two have a chance to do it the right way; get married first, then have your children. Ya'll, can have anything you want together, but you have to be together. It can't just be all you holding it down."

"You saying don't give up, but then you say I can't be the only one holding it down. Which one is it?", Renee asked, emotional and frustrated. She was extremely sensitive when talking about her relationship with Deshawn, and tremendously protective, for it was very important to her.

Kenya knew this by now and empathically replied, "Renee, all I'm saying is don't give up hope. Just keep believing in the two of you and do what you're supposed to be doing. You just keep doing the right thing and everything will work out."

Softening, Renee agreed.

"Be patient, Renee. Everything will work out."

Her heart breaking a little every time she got rejected and denied by Deshawn, Renee decided to go on a fast for the first time. She stopped all contact with him for a month and prayed. Then weeks after her 30 day fast, Renee was offered an interview in the town Deshawn lived in. She had applied a year and a half earlier and had lost all hope of ever being called. But while it would have been joyous a few months earlier, it was now completely disheartening to her, because Deshawn wouldn't even acknowledge her existence.

Folding her clothes, while listening to Kenya's voice coming through the speaker on her phone, Renee rolled her eyes. "Girl, I don't know about that interview."

"What? Why Renee? You need to go to the interview. Everything happens for a reason and you don't know why this interview came up now. You have to go. Otherwise what were you fasting for then?", Kenya pleaded, in full support of Renee and Deshawn growing up and putting their pride aside to be together. Kenya was undoubtedly convinced that they were a perfect match.

Renee sighed, "I don't know...clarity I guess."

"Did you get any?", Kenya questioned.

"Yeah, I did. I feel like the answer is that I'm supposed to be still just like Ruth. Naomi told her to be still after she made it known to Boaz that she wanted to be his wife, and I mean I've told him what I want several times. It ain't like he doesn't know. It's not like I'm asking for the world, just wanted to meet his mother and family like he met mine and for him to acknowledge me as his woman. Here I am, considering going to the interview and move there to be with him; for real, I'd move anywhere with him. I'd go where he goes. But the man won't even talk to me and I haven't done anything to him.", Renee groaned.

“Well, you did actually send him scriptures because he didn’t pick you up from the airport,” Kenya said, modestly.

“Ugh, I know. I can see now why he was upset. I wouldn’t have like that if he did it to me, so I get it. But man, I mean I can’t get forgiven for anything. You know how many times I have forgiven him for standing me up and lying to me? But let me do one thing and it’s over.”, Renee grunted.

“Girl, all I’m saying is don’t give up on you two. Just stay hopeful and faithful that what God promised you will come to pass. You said you got a sign that he was your husband, so if you believe that, then it will happen.”, Kenya said, assuredly.

“Mmm, yeah, I know God wants me to live abundantly and that He has a good plan for my life, but I can’t help but to question sometimes whether or not that was really a sign, you know? It’s real easy to get discouraged when all he does is ignore me like I ain’t nothing. A husband doesn’t treat his good thing like that.”

“But he’s not your husband yet...he will be, but not yet. So you gotta let him grow on his own. You can send him all the scriptures in the world and he’s not gonna budge, and he’s not gonna recognize that you are a blessing to him like you say he is to you until he’s ready. And just because you are, doesn’t mean he is. So maybe you’re right. Maybe all you need to do is be still. And I *know* that’s hard for you with your impatient self.”, Kenya said, laughing.

“I dunno, I just don’t wanna be no fool!”, Renee blurted, sincerely. “Really, I just want to do the right thing, and it says somewhere in the bible don’t be no fool.”

They both started laughing. “Oh, so is that in Proverbs or something? Thou shall not be a fool?”, Kenya asked.

“Yup, somewhere, girl, for real. I’m telling you.”, Renee said, jokingly.

“All right, let me go. I gotta get dinner started before this man gets home and starts worrying me about it. But, for real, you need to go on that interview and call Deshawn and tell him you’ll be down there. Ask him to meet you somewhere for lunch or something so ya’ll can talk. You two need to talk. That’s what ya’ll don’t do. All this silence ain’t helping nothing. It’s hurting ya’ll.”

“All right. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Call him!”, Kenya shouted, before hanging up the phone.

Renee took Kenya’s advice and called Deshawn. She left him a voicemail asking him if he wanted to meet up because she’d be out there for an interview. Two days later, after four months of the silent treatment, he called her back. Stunned, Renee answered and he asked how she had been. Then she asked him the same thing. They chit chatted about nothing of importance until he abruptly made up an excuse to get off the phone.

A week later, when she finished her interview, she called Deshawn who told her to come by his place. When she got there, he told her that if she took the job and moved

to the same town that he guessed he'd have to visit her sometimes since he'd be the only one she would know for a while. His aloof attitude deeply hurt Renee. She wondered how they got so far from both being in love with one another to him feeling forced to visit her if she moved there. She would never dream of moving to the small town if she weren't moving in with him. And she felt like Deshawn knew that. He said any and everything to dissuade her from moving. He even took a call from a woman friend of his, while she sat there and waited for far too long. He was being outright rude and it was the first time that she felt disrespected by him. Wounded, Renee smiled, gave him a hug and left. She put her sunglasses on, turned her music up and headed home. The next day she called the woman who interviewed her and asked not to be considered for the position because she was no longer going to relocate.

Sitting in lunch hour traffic, Renee grew impatient and turned down an unfamiliar street in an effort to find a shortcut back to work. As she drove down the quiet, tree-lined street she noticed a cute, little house with a red door for sale. She stopped, pulled into the driveway, and peered into the windows to view the renovated kitchen and shiny hardwood floors. It was an older house, with modern amenities and the style of it reminded her of a typical California house. She called the realtor when she got back to work and was amazed to find that the house was completely affordable.

The next day she met the realtor and viewed the inside and fell in love with it. It was all that she could talk about for weeks. She felt like there must be some way that she could get the house. Per the suggestion of her bank, Renee spent the next month and a half diligently working on improving her credit, and in no time her score increased.

Knowing it might be a long shot, she hadn't been too stressed about it. All she wanted was to get out of her apartment. When she got the notice that her lease was up in two months and the rent would be raised, she was adamant about not signing, yet, another lease. Renee didn't know where she was going to go, but she knew she wasn't staying there. She gave her notice that she'd be moving out and told her sister that she might need to stay with her for a while if she didn't get approved for the house, until she found a place to live. She had the overwhelming feeling that change was on the horizon and was more than ready for it.

It wasn't until she put her offer in, that Renee began to get anxious. Moving in with her sister was not ideal because her ex-boyfriend had moved back in and they were working on repairing their relationship. She just didn't want to impose. She wanted to be self-sufficient and independent like she had always been, but she just could not bring herself to commit to another year of renting in the same place. Renee needed to calm down so she called Deshawn. They had been back in communication due to her initiating it by calling him. He never called her. He would return her call, but he never just thought about her and dialed her number, which often made her wonder if he ever thought about her at all.

When he answered the phone, she excitedly told him that she put the offer in and that they had 48 hours to let her know, and that she didn't know where she was going to go if they didn't accept her offer. He listened intently as she became more passionate, stating that she wanted more, that something had to change. She told him that she wanted to start her family. At this, Deshawn joked, "You want me to be Joel and you Victoria?" He laughed, while she remained solemn. She guessed that he said that because she

forwarded him daily Joel Osteen emails and because he wanted to make the conversation less serious. But it was important to Renee. She wanted him to hear her. She explained to him that she wanted to be his “ol’ lady” again and that she wanted to meet his mother and be counted.

She continued to press the issue, telling him that she wanted to start her family again when all of a sudden Deshawn shouted, “I’m scared, Renee! Is that what you want me to say?” Confused, Renee didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what he was scared of. And she wondered why he said it like that. She got the sense that he didn’t trust her with his feelings and that sadden her. Deshawn calmed down and explained, “I want the same thing you want, baby, but I’m just not ready. Every time I hear one of my friends telling me about their marriage it sets me back another eight months!”

Renee was astounded. “Eight months? What?” She halfway wanted to laugh at what she thought was absurd, but she also wanted to cry. “If God is in our relationship then we...”

“You don’t think they got God in their relationship?”, he shouted.

Renee shook her head knowing that there wasn’t anything that she could say to make him understand her faith in them. He was resolute in his thinking and it occurred to her that she would never be able to make him see what they could have together; only God could reveal that to him. She was convinced that he was believing the lies of the devil, who used fear and false mindsets to keep him from his blessing, and therefore it was a fight that was for God, not for her. Feeling disappointed and defeated, Renee asked softly, “If I don’t get this house, what am I gonna do?”

“We’ll figure...I mean, you’ll figure it out.” Deshawn quickly corrected himself. But Renee heard it. There was no denying that she heard him say “we’ll” because at that very moment her heart leaped with joy.

“We’ll figure it out?”, Renee eagerly hoped he’d repeat it.

“You’ll figure it out.”, Deshawn said, steadfastly.

“Oh, ‘cause I thought I heard you say ‘we’ll figure it out’,” said Renee unrelentingly.

“Nah.” They held the phones in silence while Deshawn promptly thought of an excuse to get off of the phone in haste.

Hours later Renee texted him the pictures of the house that she ultimately hoped would be theirs. She wanted a house, which to her represented accomplishment. She was an adult now and that is what adults did; they lived in houses. ‘Having a home would be worth working for,’ thought Renee. She thought that owning a home would be the beginning of the life she desired. The entire day went by and Renee’s picture text to Deshawn went unanswered. She wondered if he liked the house and felt badly that he had ignored her again. The next day Renee still had not received a response from him so she spontaneously texted him, ‘The End.’

"The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:14)

The offer had been accepted. Renee Lavender was now a homeowner. She never really thought the day that she would turn the key to her very own home would actually come. She had always dreamt of having her own home, but never truly thought that it was attainable, not without winning the lottery. She told anyone who would listen that God had given her a home. "He just put a house in my lap!" Her friends and family didn't doubt it because they all assured her that buying a house was not usually as painless and as effortless as it was for her. She was overcome with joy and felt tremendously blessed. Wanting to share the good news, she posted a picture of herself standing in front of her new home on Facebook. Roger saw her post and requested to be her Facebook friend. She accepted and he sent her a message congratulating her. She thanked him and he responded flirtatiously. Renee dismissed his advances as a harmless joke and invited him to her housewarming party. Roger promised to be there and then asked if she was seeing anyone.

"Well, my ex may be there. I'm still kind of hoping he and I will get back together.", Renee wrote.

"Mmm, well I want to see this guy that's got your attention over me and see what he's got that I don't have.", Roger admittedly replied.

Renee laughed. 'Men,' she thought, as she shook her head.

Later, Renee called Deshawn even though he never responded to her break up-even-though-they-weren't-officially-together text. He was the only person who she really wanted to come to her housewarming party aside from her family and Pastor Hunter and First Lady, who were coming by before the party to bless the house. It had been a month since they last spoke and Renee hated that he never contacted her to see whatever happened with the house. When he answered the phone, she loved hearing his handsome voice. She missed him. They talked as though no time had passed. They laughed and joked with one another as if they were both oblivious to anything in their past. During the conversation, Deshawn congratulated her on the house and asked if she bought a refrigerator. His question made it obvious that he had viewed the picture text of the house that day after all. Renee simply said 'yes' wishing he didn't have so much pride. Then she flippantly mentioned one of his past transgressions, to which he quickly interrupted her and said, "Nope, nope we're not gonna talk about that...maybe we can start a new chapter."

"Yeah, that would be good.", Renee said, feeling content. "But you should know that I've changed a little bit."

Deshawn laughed, "You have?"

Feeling a little offended she said, "Yes I have. I'm different, better. You know I've been going to church and I'm trying to really live for the Kingdom of God and not the Kingdom of the world. I'm tryna have both feet in and live right."

"Yeah, I hear you," he retorted. "I'm sorry; I guess I'm just not around you enough to see the change."

“Yeah, I guess so because I have. I’ve decided that I don’t want to have sex anymore until I’m married.”

“Why?”, Deshawn asked, softly.

His tone made Renee feel weak. Sex had always played a humongous part in the way they communicated with each other, but she was sure that he would understand. She could no longer pretend that it was ok to have sex outside of marriage when she knew it wasn’t. It was a sin and she didn’t want to continue to knowingly sin. Besides, Renee was convinced that God would bless their relationship if they were not fornicating. She didn’t even think that it would be hard, especially since she had not slept with Deshawn for almost a year; most of which he ignored her. It was an easy decision for her; she wasn’t having sex anyway. Renee was also convinced that it would not be a big deal to Deshawn, since he already knew what it was like to have sex with her. She figured that if they ever got married he wouldn’t feel robbed of knowing what he was getting. But Deshawn didn’t know what was going on with her and questioned her again. However, all she could muster up was, “Because.” Eventually, they said several ‘good-byes’ and ‘good nights’ before finally hanging up the phone. Just before Renee hit the ‘End’ button on her phone, she heard Deshawn say what sounded like, “I miss you.” The call ended and she felt perfect.

Two weeks later, after all the wings and deli sandwiches had been eaten, games had been played and housewarming gifts had been opened, Renee climbed into bed sad and depleted. She had a great time with all of her friends and family and felt so happy to have her pastor and his wife take the time to come bless her house. But the one thing that Renee coveted most was denied to her again. The most unbearable part of Deshawn’s absence from her first intimate celebration at her very own home was not that her coworker told her “not to be surprised if he doesn’t show” and that she had to look at her unfazed the whole time, it was the fact that he didn’t call to say that he wasn’t coming. Her disappointment grew with each passing day afterwards until she could no longer stand it. She pondered it over in her mind several times and she still couldn’t understand. ‘Even if he thought that he would be uncomfortable why not call and tell me that?’, Renee wondered, sorrowfully. She had to know why he thought that not attending or calling was a perfectly kind and normal thing to do. She was undoubtedly convinced that if anyone else in the world had invited him to a party he would, at the very least, call and say that he couldn’t make it. But Renee didn’t feel like she should be considered just anybody to Deshawn. ‘Didn’t he value her feelings at all?’, she contemplated.

A week after her party, Renee called Deshawn. She asked the evitable question and he answered by telling her that he had a funeral to go to and that he just “couldn’t be at two places at once.” She wasn’t sure if it was a lie or not but either way she believed that she deserved a call. Both Kenya and Cara kept encouraging Renee to stay positive. Cara wanted to support her sister but she wanted her to be happy and time and time again she set herself up for disappointment. Cara was always compelled to remind Renee of Deshawn’s past behavior of ignoring her, avoiding responsibility, never calling her, but she knew how much her sister loved him so she kept it to herself. Kenya, on the other hand, was unwavering in her notion that Renee needed to hang in there. She repeatedly

told her not to be dismayed by the current situation because it was only temporary. Renee got the same message from Pastor Hunter's sermon, "What it looks like is not what it shall be." Thus, she did her best to encourage herself and clung to the Word. She couldn't get enough of T.D. Jakes and Joel Osteen's televised sermons. The more Word she heard, the more she sought it. She looked forward to Wednesday night bible study and listened to YouTube sermons while driving in her car. Renee needed comfort from the Lord. She wanted peace and that is what the Word gave her.

For the first time Renee really felt like she had to, unfortunately, let Deshawn slip out of her torn heart. It had been a few months since the housewarming party and Renee was settling in her new home well. She relished going home after a long day. It was cozy and peaceful and she loved the way the warm sun shined brightly throughout it. She was working on being patient with God and surrendering to His will for her life. The scriptures that she read in the Bible and the sermons she heard instructed her that the Lord will always provide her every need and that He will bring her dreams to pass if she just believed. It wasn't always easy. Renee spent many nights sobbing in her pillow asking the Lord why her man couldn't be in bed next to her; why couldn't she have a husband like every other woman in the world. She wondered why it was so hard for Deshawn to love her the way she deserved and prayed that he would submit himself to God so that he could see the truth; that she was indeed his wife and that they should be together. But the only answer Renee believed she received time after time was to be patient, be still. So she continued to try despite bouts of anxiousness.

However, just when she thought that she could successfully tough an indefinite separation out, Deshawn called. It was about 2am the morning after Thanksgiving. Renee knew that he'd be at his mom's for the holiday but never expected him to call her. They talked about Thanksgiving dinner and asked about each other's family. Renee enthusiastically told him that she hosted dinner at her house this year because she was able to buy a huge brand new dining room table and chairs. She expressed to him how she had been eyeing the large wooden table, bench and chairs at an upscale furniture store for months hoping that it would go on sale. Then one day during her weekly window shopping trip, she saw the chairs and bench not on sale but on clearance! She was elated and knew that she couldn't let such a deal pass her by so she took a chance and applied for a store credit card. And when the cashier told her that she was approved, she and Cara almost passed out with delight. They were both amazed. Even though she had purchased a home, Renee hadn't realized just how much her credit had improved. She and her sister had been so conditioned to think that they had ruined their credit for life. It never occurred to her that her financial future could be brighter.

Renee went on to tell Deshawn that she had been approved for eight hundred dollars which wasn't enough for the table, bench and chairs. So she proceeded to purchase just the bench and chairs and even admitted to him that she asked God why He couldn't have just given her enough credit for all of it.

Deshawn continued to listen to her talk fast and excited. She sounded happy. He loved her like that. Renee finished her speech with the moral of the story. She told him that although she wondered why God didn't give her the extra two hundred dollars to buy the table also, she was still grateful for what she had. It wasn't until weeks later that she got the answer to her question because upon visiting the store again to see if the table had

gone on sale, she found that they had only one left and marked it down severely to make room for new merchandise. Therefore, not only did Renee have enough credit to buy it but she had more than enough! She explained to Deshawn that it was then that she knew that God knew that He was supplying her with more than she hoped for.

“You always get what you want don’t you?”, Deshawn asked her.

Renee smiled, but thought she detected disdain in his voice. She wondered if he didn’t purposely deny her what she wanted, be it a night out at her favorite restaurant or an unsolicited phone call, just to ensure that she didn’t get everything she wanted. They continued to talk and soon the conversation came back to his family. And Renee mentioned that yet another Thanksgiving had gone by and she still hadn’t met anyone in his family. “I just wanna know my position, Deshawn.”

“It’s been three years and you don’t know your position?”, he countered.

‘No,’ thought Renee.

“You want me to come over?”

“Yeah,” Renee mumbled.

“You sure it’s a good idea? I don’t wanna be the devil for you.”, Deshawn stated seriously.

Renee sighed, “Well, I dunno. What do you think?”

“I think I’m backed up and I ain’t gonna be able to come over there and just lay next to you all night and be cool. I’m not eighteen anymore. That ain’t gonna get it for me.”, Deshawn said, honestly.

“I guess you’re right. We better not.”

“All right, I’ll call you tomorrow and see what you got going on.”

“Okay, good night.”, Renee said, sweetly.

“Good night.”

A few weeks later, Deshawn called Renee at 3 a.m. He said that he was en route to his mom’s from Atlanta and thought he’d call to see if she wanted him to come by. When she said it was okay he said, “I thought you were mad at me.”

“I was. But if you thought that then why did you call?”

“I just thought I’d try. I didn’t even know if you were gonna answer the phone for me or not.”, Deshawn confessed. “What you got on?”

Renee quickly said, “Some sweatpants, a turtleneck and a scarf.”

“What’s wrong with you?”, Deshawn wanted to know.

Renee busted out in laughter. “Nothing! Oh and my niece is here.”

“What?”

“Sally spent the night. She wanted to stay because I told her that I’d order some kid movie she wanted to see but she fell asleep.”

“Well, get her all situated before I get there.”, Deshawn ordered.

“But, I can’t. She’s too heavy. You’re gonna have to put her on the couch when you get here.”

Deshawn groaned. “All right, I’m going through McDonald’s, you want anything?”

“No, thanks.”

When he pulled into the driveway she noticed that he wasn’t driving his covered truck. Instead, he got out of a new Cadillac. “What? You got a new car?”, Renee inquired.

“Yeah,” he said, as he headed for the door.

“You look nice.”, Renee noticed.

“So do you.”, Deshawn said, sincerely despite her head scarf and baggy clothes. She smiled knowing it was the first time that she allowed him to see her without her hair down and concealer, mascara and gloss on. Although, she felt comfortable, she untied her scarf to let her hair hang down. She knew that he liked it that way.

“Wow, you got yourself an ol’ man pimp daddy Caddy!”, Renee teased. It was a sexy car, but she never pictured him in a slick Cadillac before. She wondered what it meant; if he was changing, going down a wrong road.

Deshawn shook his head. “Only you would say that.” He smiled and plopped down on the couch, drunk. He took in the house as he removed his tennis shoes. “It feels like...nah.” He stopped suddenly.

“What? It feels like what?”, Renee asked, curiously.

“It feels like home.”

Renee smiled. ‘Wow,’ she thought. She loved him and she wanted so much for the house to be their home. She inferred that he was proud of her and that made her very happy. She sat next to him on the couch, while he playfully forced her to try a nugget dipped in Ketchup. She ate it reluctantly and grimaced thinking it was gross. They laughed and talked about foods they like and then he said, “Just remember, if you ever order me some food, I just want the chicken and the fries, no bread.”

After he finished eating, Renee gathered his trash and threw it away while he stretched his long body out on the couch. He pulled her knitted throw blanket over himself and said, “This blanket smells like you.” Renee smiled thinking, ‘How nice that he still remembers what I smell like after almost a year.’ Then he hopped up and said, “Lemme go get her and bring her in here before I get too tired.” They walked into the

bedroom and he picked up seven-year-old Sally, effortlessly. “Watch her head,” Renee instructed just as Sally instinctively rested her head on his broad shoulder and wrapped her arms around him. Renee observed Deshawn as he walked down the hallway holding her niece and then carefully placed her on the couch. He moved aside and started for the hallway.

Renee held her hair back with one hand as she bent down to kiss her niece on the forehead and then pulled the blanket over her. When she stood up she was surprised to see Deshawn standing there watching her. Then he disappeared down the hall. Renee turned off the lamp but left the Christmas tree lights on. As she made her way toward the bedroom she wondered if he had just seen their future like she had.

While wrestling in the bed, Deshawn finally blurted, “Not tonight.”

“What?”, Renee whimpered.

“Not tonight,” he whispered, as he kissed her slowly.

His words transfixed her and she wanted him. Her legs instinctively spread a part. She had succumbed to temptation. When he rolled off of her, Renee turned her head so he couldn’t see the tear that rolled down her face. She prayed long and fervently for forgiveness before falling asleep.

The next morning, as the sun warmed the room, Deshawn played with Renee’s hair while she blushed. They held each other as they talked about everything from his new car, “I’m just a poor boy tryna have something,” to babies and marriage.

“I’m not running behind you to no altar just ‘cause you’re pregnant.” Deshawn informed her.

“So you want your son wondering why his daddy didn’t marry his momma?”

Deshawn grunted, “He wouldn’t know nothing ‘til about three. I’m not saying I wouldn’t marry you. I’m just sayin’ I’m not just gonna do it because I got you pregnant. I mean if I had to get married right now, for some reason, it’d be you because you’re the last person I’ve been dealing with. That’s if I *had* to get married.”

On one hand, Renee thought affectionately about his comment, ‘Aw, he’d marry me.’ Then, after considering what he said further, she felt puzzled. She wanted a man to marry her because he wanted to, definitely not because he had to and certainly not because she was the last woman he was with. ‘What happened to love?’, Renee wondered. She now knew that love was not proud. And she recognized that Deshawn had mounds of pride. She asked him if he would go to Kenya’s wedding with her.

“Why, you want me to see you all dressed up?”, he nudged her and she smiled. “Hey, how far is the wedding from Victorville?” She knew that he was asking because his son lived in Victorville. This is what she loved about him. ‘He’s thoughtful, responsible (when he wants to be) and a good man,’ she thought, admiring him. She was confident that he’d be a fantastic father to the twin boys they’d have one day.

“It’s not far. About two hours away. You know you really need to see your dad before you see your son.”, she advised, perceptively.

“You’re right,” Deshawn said, enlightened. “That’s the realest thing you ever said. But I got questions for him and what if I don’t like what he says?”

“You’re grown now, with your own son so you’ll be meeting with him as two grown men, two fathers. You’ll have a better understanding of him as just a man instead of as your father.”, Renee said, caringly. “You may not like his answers but you might understand them better now. And I think that when you have a new understanding of him and the decisions he made you might have peace with it and him and that’ll help you with your son.”

Deshawn didn’t want to let on that he was contemplating what she had just said, so he changed the subject and got her blushing again. When they both stood at the door around noon, Deshawn mentioned that his family was having a “family cookout” the next day and a fish fry the day after that. Renee smiled, “What time should I be there?” He looked down at her and informed her that, “It’s for family only.”

She chuckled, thinking he was teasing her. It wasn’t until the entire weekend had gone by that Renee realized that Deshawn really did mean “family only”, for he hadn’t called her. She reasoned that he had only told her so he would have a reason not to call or come back again to see her. The idea hurt Renee badly, since she loved him like family.

Days later, she spent hours on the phone with Kenya, tormented. “It’s not about his new car or that he called you at 3 a.m. because that’s what you guys do. You’re really just hurt that he won’t acknowledge you as his girlfriend and let you meet his family. And I don’t blame you. Ya’ll been dealing with each other long enough and that man knows he loves you.”, Kenya stated, emphatically.

But, even though Renee reminisced how he was the only guy that she ever saw herself marrying and having children with, she wasn’t buying Kenya’s idea that Deshawn loved her. Sure, she loved that once upon a time they talked about baby names and that he talked of 401k plans and insurance policies. ‘He’d be a great provider for me and our children,’ Renee concluded. But all that had changed. Now, she was lucky if he talked to her at all. ‘If he loved me, then he would have wanted his mother to meet me by now. It wouldn’t be so hard for him to tell me or to show me,’ she thought.

It was a new year and Renee was determined to have a new attitude to match. She recalled Deshawn telling her that if she ever ordered food from him somewhere not to get him any bread. She loved learning little tidbits about him like that and realized that there was so much more about each other that they just didn’t know. With all the stress and strife of trying to find their footing, they hadn’t made a point to simply enjoy one another and have fun. And Renee desperately wanted to have fun.

She was excited about her upcoming birthday, which fell three weeks after Christmas. Rationalizing Deshawn’s behavior a couple of weeks earlier, Renee thought she’d call and ask him if he would spend her birthday with her. She’d give him the benefit of the doubt. ‘Who knows,’ she thought, ‘he might surprise me with a bouquet of flowers delivered to my job. Or he might ask me to come out and see one of his games, and then take me out for dinner and a movie afterward. He might also suggest we take that trip to the aquarium that we always talked about. Why not? Why shouldn’t I have a birthday weekend with the man I love?’ She was extremely doubtful that any of her

fantasies would become reality, but she didn't know and hoped for the best. After all, she knew that she deserved to be in love and happy.

But when he answered her saying that he had a game and that it was too far away to be making plans, she already knew it wasn't going to happen. Her birthday was one week away. It wasn't too far away to make plans. 'Clearly, he doesn't want to do anything with me for my birthday,' she lamented.

While still on the phone, she could hear him shouting at his students. She heard him call the middle school girls 'baby' and felt a hint of jealousy. She thought that she was his only baby. He got off the phone abruptly, because he was at work and she didn't hear back from him.

She called a few days later, and he didn't answer the phone. Then the afternoon of her birthday she got a text from Deshawn which read, 'Happy Birthday. I hope ur enjoying ur day.' To that Renee, trying to save face, replied, 'Thanks I am.' It was official. Her heart had finally broken in two. When she informed Kenya, she was speechless. Kenya had been rooting for them and believed that they were going to work it out eventually. She was feeling a little crushed herself, since she was always pleading his case and referred to him as 'brother-in-law.'

Renee was feeling the pressure of finishing her thesis by her deadline. She thanked God for the blessing that He gave her through Dr. Silver. When it was time to tell him what she wanted her thesis to be she took a chance. Knowing that initially, he told her that the program was not structured to support her pursuit in writing, she asked him if she could write a book. And to her surprise, he granted her request. Renee was thrilled. For many years she wrote short stories and poems and only fantasized about writing an actual book. And because she was truly a procrastinator, she considered it a blessing to write her book as a thesis.

But the pressure of completing her thesis timely, coupled with the stress of not having enough money to get caught up on her bills was draining. However, this time around Renee was keenly aware that her outlook was different. Despite the stress she was under she was thankful for God's grace and mercy. She knew that He had kept her in her right mind and brought her from a mighty long way. She went from the food stamp line to owning her own home, from writing bad checks to overdraft her account to writing her own book! And even though the wait for her income tax return seemed longer than ever before, she was confident that she would receive it right on time and she did. She knew that the Lord would supply all of her needs. She was determined to make lasting changes in the way she handled her finances. So when her church offered a free eight week Money Remodel class, she eagerly signed up.

"... I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." Philipians 3: 13-14

One night after enjoying a fun night out with her girlfriends, Renee fell onto her bed exhausted. About ten minutes later she heard a loud, excruciating noise. She lay there for a few minutes trying to logically determine what the noise could be. Then it occurred to her, it sounded like scratching coming from the wall in the living room.

Petrified, Renee felt around for her things in the dark and through them in her duffle bag and fearfully raced down the hallway and out the front door. It was midnight when she arrived at her sister's house and crashed in her guest room.

After a month of her dad attempting to set traps in the attic and close up entryways, Renee was desperate. She wanted nothing more than to go home but she trembled with anxiety at the thought of staying there alone now. It was times she felt like this that she thought of Deshawn most. She wished that she had him as her man to go home to every night. With him there with her she wouldn't have been so scared. But it had been several weeks since they had spoken and every now and then something would remind her of him, in fact, she thought of him every day.

One day while at work, a male client called her with a young voice. Her eyes welled up with emotion when he said his name was Darius, which was one of the names that she dreamt of naming their son. She was sad that he didn't pick up the phone to speak to her on her birthday; that he had purposely avoided her. It was evident that he didn't want to spend her birthday with her and she just couldn't understand why. She didn't know how she could be so wrong about him and wondered why it felt like he loved her. She soon resolved that perhaps she hadn't known what love was. But she felt blessed that she was now learning from church and from reading her Bible exactly what love was supposed to be.

She was convinced that God still had a good plan for her life and was determined not to be depressed because Deshawn rejected her. That was a decision that he made for his life. She still loved him and wished him well. But she was a conqueror, and was determined not to stay down. She had a great life to live and looked forward to all the wonderful things the Lord had in store for her, including a loving husband.

Renee did her best to remain positive about essentially living out of her duffle bag. She kept telling herself that it wouldn't last forever and focused on writing her thesis. She would go straight to Starbucks after work and write until closing. Then she slipped into her sister's house, went to sleep and repeated the same routine for nearly two months.

She finally relented, and called the professional wildlife trapper guy she had called a month prior and made an appointment for him to set traps in her attic. The first time he quoted her a price of \$1000 to resolve the scratching in the wall issue she hung up the phone quickly. However, when she'd go over to the house in the daytime and hear the noise, she gave up trying to save money and called him back. She thanked God when the guy worked out a payment plan with her. He set traps and told her he'd check them in about ten days.

The longer she was displaced from her house, the more she prayed. Still, there were times that Renee would cry while driving in her car. She wondered why it was happening to her; wondered if there was some lesson that she was supposed to be learning from it. At one point, she even told Cara that she thought she might just sell the house. Cara told her that that was not an option and reminded her that she loved her home and had only been living there for six months. Renee listened as Cara told her that fear is the devil's tool and that it was the devil who was trying to get her out of her blessing; the house. After hearing this, Renee was determined to go home. She continued to pray that she would feel safe and comfortable there by herself again.

She began to worry about the second lump sum payment that she would owe the

wildlife guy at the end of the month and continually prayed to God to give her an idea on how to get more money. She started looking for part-time evening jobs but wondered when she'd find the time to finish her thesis. But then that Friday afternoon her boss sent an email out to all the employees offering unprecedented overtime one hour before and one hour after her shift. Renee immediately responded and thanked God for being right on time.

The following Monday Renee was up early eager and grateful to be working for extra pay. She would now have the money to pay the wildlife guy. Not only that but she's still have time in the evenings to work on her thesis. She knew that the Lord always had a good plan and could make a way where she saw no way.

Days later, the wildlife guy told her that she had squirrels in her attic. Renee was scared. She admitted to Kenya that she never really felt the need to have a man live with her but that she wanted that sense of security now more than ever. Kenya told her that now that she had a new desire; God would make a way for it to come to pass. She told Renee, "You left your home like Ruth and went to a new land. You have gleaned and now you have roots. I believe that God gave you that home because that is where you're supposed to be, Renee. You have always jumped up and wanted to move somewhere to get a fresh start when you are sad or uncomfortable, but now you can't do that. You have to stay put now. And that's a good thing. You are right where you are supposed to be and you will reap your harvest, girl. I know you will."

Renee kept praying as the wildlife man continued to work on ridding her attic of squirrels, and kept pressing forward toward her goal of completing her thesis. She was amazed that she was getting very close to finishing her book and that in a few short months she would graduate and have a master's degree. Kimtrel constantly told her how excited she was that she was writing the final bits to her book, "I always knew it!", she exclaimed. Renee became ecstatic when she thought of the mind-blowing accomplishments.

One day she ran into her old undergraduate professor, Dr. Kirseed. They were both thrilled to see one another after such a long time. During the course of their conversation, Renee revealed that she was stuck in the customer service field and desired a job in the academic field. She told him that she had applied for adjunct instructor positions and academic advisor positions, but were turned down for them all due to no experience. She just needed a chance she explained. Then Dr. Kirseed, matter-of-factly, offered her a summer job, teaching a one hour English Composition class two nights a week. Renee couldn't believe her ears. She was stunned and overwhelmed by his generosity and kindness and got on her knees that night to thank God for His goodness and favor.

The following week, on the first day of spring, the wildlife guy pulled out the squirrels and sealed up an overlooked entryway. Renee called Kenya and Kimtrel and texted her whole family to proclaim the good news. She was going to be able to move back home. The saga was finally over. Renee was tremendously relieved. Two days later, seated at her prized dining room table in her own house, Renee wrote the final words to her book, 'The End.'

"For I know the thoughts that I think toward you", says the Lord, "thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope" Jeremiah 29:11