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# GENESIS

*by Tope Folarin*

## 1.

She told me I could serve her in heaven.

She accompanied me to school each day. School was about a mile away, and a few hundred feet into my trek, just as my family's apartment building drifted out of view behind me, she would appear at my side.

I don't remember how she looked. Memory often summons a generic figure in her place: an elderly white woman with frizzled gray hair, slightly bent over, a smile featuring an assortment of gaps and silver linings. I do remember her touch however—it felt cool and papery, disarmingly comfortable on the hottest days of fall. She would often pat my head as we walked together, and a penetrating silence would cancel the morning sounds around us. I felt comfortable, protected somehow, in her presence. She never walked all the way to school with me, but her parting words were always the same:

"Remember, if you are a good boy here on earth, you can serve me in heaven."

I was five years old. Her words sounded magical to me. Vast and alluring. I didn't know her, I barely knew her name, but the offer she held out to me each morning seemed far too generous to dismiss lightly. In class I would think about what servitude in heaven would be like. I imagined myself carrying buckets of water for her on streets of gold, rubbing her feet as angels sang praises in the background. I imagined that I'd have my own heavenly shack. I'd have time to do my own personal heavenly things as well.

How else would I get to heaven?

One day I told my father about her offer. We were talking about heaven, a favorite subject of his, and I mentioned that I already had a place there. "I've already found someone to serve," I said.

"What do you mean?"

Dad smiled warmly at me. I felt his love. I repeated myself: "Daddy, I'm going to heaven."

"And how are you going to get there?"

I told him about the old lady, my heavenly shack, the streets of gold. My father stared at me a moment, grief and sadness surging briefly to the surface of his face. And then anger. He leaned forward, stared into my eyes.

"Listen to me now. The only person you will serve in heaven is God. You will serve no one else."

## 2.

My father has told me many times that he settled in Utah because he didn't want to be where anyone else was. His cousins and siblings had left Nigeria for Athens, London, Rome, New York City, and Houston. My father wanted to be an American, but he also craved isolation, so he decided he would travel to the one place in America that he knew nothing about.

He left Nigeria in 1979, after a school in Utah, Davis State University, offered him a place in its mechanical engineering program. His bride, my mother, accompanied him. They arrived in a country that bore little resemblance to the country they expected. Dad, a devout fan of television shows like *Gunsmoke* and *Bonanza*, was disappointed when he discovered that cowboy hats were no longer in style, and he sadly stowed his first American purchase—a brown ten-gallon hat—in his suitcase, and under his bed. Mom arrived in America expecting peace and love—she had fallen for the music of The Beatles and Bob Dylan as a high school student in Lagos while listening to the records that her businessman father brought back from his trips abroad. Though she had imagined a country where love conquered all, where black people and white people had finally managed to surmount their differences, Mom and Dad arrived, instead, in a place where there were no other black people for miles around, a place dominated by a religion they'd never heard of before.

But this was America. And they were in love. They moved into a small apartment in Ogden, Utah, and began a family. I came first, in 1981, and my brother followed in 1983. Dad attended his classes during the day while Mom explored the city, and at night my parents held each other close and spoke their dreams into existence. They would have more children. My father would start a business. They would become wealthy. They would send their children to the best schools. They would have many grandchildren. They would build their own version of paradise on a little slip of desert in a country that itself was a dream, a place that seemed impossible until they stepped off the plane, shielding the sun from their eyes, and saw for themselves the expanse of land that my father had idly pointed to on a fading map many years before.

## 3.

As I look back now, especially with the knowledge of what will come after, the rest of my life set in unflattering relief, I realize that my first five years were the most ordinary of my childhood. We moved around frequently, but I can only remember joy.

One of my favorite memories from this era: for some reason I'm chasing my brother around our tiny apartment with a red crayon. When I catch him I pin him against the wall and color each of his teeth red as he screams. My mother shrieks when she sees him; she thinks he's bleeding because of the red wax that's shining from his teeth. She laughs when I tell her that the blood isn't real, and then we all laugh and I allow my brother to color my teeth as well. Then we color Mom's teeth—she prefers lime green.

Life flowed easily until we moved to Bountiful. We settled there because my father had found a job at an auto repair shop in neighboring Layton, and Bountiful was one of

the few places close by with any affordable housing. My father couldn't find a job as a mechanical engineer anywhere in northern Utah, but he knew a bit about cars, and he figured he would work as a mechanic until something better came along.

My mother's illness began to reveal itself to us shortly after we moved into our two-bedroom apartment, a tiny place near the center of town with pale yellow walls and bristly carpet. Mom's voice, once quiet and reassuring, grew loud and fearsome. Her hugs, once warm and comforting, became cold and rigid. And then Mom became violent—she would throw spoons and forks at my father whenever she was upset. She quickly worked her way up to the knives.

One morning my brother and I scrambled to our parents room because we heard Dad crying. I didn't think such a thing was possible. We saw Mom standing over Dad, her eyes boiling with rage. Dad was almost naked. His clothes, now nothing more than torn rags, were arrayed haphazardly around the room. He was bleeding from a wound on his thigh, and his face was wreathed in a constellation of sweat and tears. My brother and I reached over to him but Mom cursed at us:

GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!

I was terrified. I looked at Dad. His bottom lip was shaking. His teeth were red. "Yes, go!" he said. "What are you waiting for? Go now!"

We obliged. We hugged each other in the corner of our room. Moments later, Dad began to scream.

Over the course of the next few days my brother and I witnessed this scene many times, my father cowering on the floor, my mother standing imperiously over him. He took her punishment whenever she descended into one of her moods, and afterwards he would tell us that Mom wasn't feeling like herself, but that everything would soon be OK. We believed him because we didn't realize how sick she was.

Before long we realized the truth. After Dad left for work each morning my mother would lock herself in their room. She rarely interacted with us, but occasionally she would open the door and ask us to come inside. She would ask us to stand in the corner of the room, near the dresser. She would point to various places in the room: her closet, Dad's desk, the empty space near her full-length mirror. She would ask us if we saw it.

"See what Mommy?"

"Don't you see that? What is wrong with you?"

My brother and I would look at each other. Was this a game?

"Mommy, I don't see anything. Can we go now?"

"No! Not until you tell me what it is doing there. Tell me why it won't leave!"

Sometimes my brother and I lied. We made up stories about what we saw and my mother would nod sagely. Sometimes she disagreed with us and told us to look again. We were always confused. We felt anxious. This could have been fun, but the wild look in my mother's eyes was unnerving.

She was seeing something we would never see, some figment of her afflicted mind had gained substance, was haunting her.

Sometimes she told us that we had to leave before they came to get us. "Something about this place isn't right," she'd say. "Not right at all."

Then she'd pull up her covers, switch on the radio, and mutter herself to sleep.

## 4.

I started school on September 7, 1987, a few weeks before I turned six. I was excited because I'd spent many mornings watching the kids of my neighborhood trip past my bedroom window with books under their arms and bags on their backs, like they were departing for another world. I dimly sensed that at school I could become something more than a brother or son, that each day I went I would come back carrying knowledge that was mine alone.

My family walked with me to school that first day, and I remember the principal extending her hand when I met her. I shyly extended mine as well, and as we shook hands she said, "We are very happy you're here!"

It was in her eyes. The way she looked at me. Like I was something scary and unknown. That's how I knew I was different. On the playground all my classmates asked if they could touch my hair. I said OK. Then Simon rubbed my skin and ran away crying to the playground attendant.

"It won't come off!" he wailed. "Why won't it come off?"

A few days later I asked my father why my hair was so kinky, and why I couldn't wash the brown off my skin. He began talking about the importance of pride, the meaning of self-respect, but I didn't fully understand what he was saying.

As he spoke, I thought about the old lady I'd met on my way to school.

That morning, Dad had hugged me at the door of our apartment and told me that I'd have to walk to school by myself because he had to work and Mom wasn't feeling well. I said OK, but I was afraid because school seemed so far away.

As I walked to school, tentatively, nervously, she suddenly appeared, like I'd dreamed her into existence.

She told me her name was Mrs. Hansen, and she asked me what I was doing. I told her I was walking to school. She smiled.

"I've never seen a little black boy around here before," she said "Where are you from?"

"I'm from here," I said. She laughed and placed a hand on my shoulder.

She spoke as we walked, and I enjoyed hearing her voice, the gentle rise and fall of it, because it somehow seemed familiar to me. She asked me questions about Dad and Mom and my brother. She said that she'd always wanted to go to Africa, but she'd never had the chance.

When we were about a block from school she looked into my eyes and patted my head.

"I enjoyed speaking with you. You're a wonderful little boy." She blinked slowly and nodded. "Keep it up. Maybe one day you'll get to serve me in heaven. If you do, I promise you'll get everything you've ever wanted."

The happiness I felt as I turned and ran to school, the sheer joy, is something I've been searching for ever since.

5.

I woke up that morning to my mother rubbing my hair. Mom was smiling down at me when I opened my eyes. She looked beautiful. She was dressed in her favorite outfit: a finely embroidered purple blouse covered by a flowing wrapper, a matching headdress hovering atop her cascading braids. She asked me to wake up my brother and after hugging us she asked us to get dressed.

"Where are we going Mommy?" I asked as I pulled on my pants.

"On an adventure!" she said, smiling widely. "Now hurry so we won't be late."

My brother and I moved quickly in the crisp darkness. We rushed into the living room when we were done, and Mom evaluated us in a single glance.

"Go get your backpacks and pack some clothes as well."

"Where are we going?"

"I told you, on an adventure!"

"What about Daddy?"

Mom turned and glanced at the wall.

"He's coming later, after work."

"How about school?" I asked. I'd only been in kindergarten for a month.

Mom gave me a half smile. "Don't worry! Just get ready."

We ran back to our bedroom and packed our bags with assorted socks, underwear, shirts, and pants. After a few minutes we returned to the living room.

"All done!" we yelled in unison.

She laughed.

"You guys were quick! OK, now wait, someone is coming to pick us up."

We sat. My brother and I tried to blow smoke rings with the frosty air. Mom disappeared into her bedroom and when she returned she was dragging a rolling suitcase behind her. In her right hand she was clutching a few records. She had replaced her headdress with a large, brown cowboy hat. I'd never seen her so happy in my life.

Someone rapped on the door a few minutes later, and Mom nodded at us.

"Go ahead!" she exclaimed. "This is part of the adventure!"

My brother and I raced to the door, but I got there first. There was a woman standing there. She had short red hair, and her freckles were so densely packed that I wondered how each one survived without space, without room to grow.

"How are you?" she asked. "You are so cute! Are you ready to go?"

Mom joined us at the door.

"Yes, we are ready. Let us go before it is too late. We have so much to do today."

We piled into the lady's car. I can't remember what kind of car it was, just that it was small and that my mother insisted that I sit in the front. The freckled lady turned the ignition and revved the engine while my mother held my brother close. The lady turned to me and asked if I was cold. I shook my head, but we sat in the dark until I felt the heat on my shoes and face. Then she put the car into gear and we drove off.

We passed the local grocery store, Smith's, and I suddenly realized that we weren't going on an adventure.

"Mommy, where is this woman taking us?"

"I already told you! Now be quiet and enjoy the ride."

"Mommy, I don't believe you. Where are we going? Where's Daddy?"

Mom ignored me. The lady patted me on the head and turned on the radio. Stevie Wonder was singing something but I don't know what it was.

6.

I don't remember what happened after I realized that we weren't actually going on an adventure. My mind skips, like a ruined compact disc, to a small room with bare walls at the YWCA in Salt Lake City. I start the day with a tutor who showers me with praise; she brings books for me to read every day, and she tells me I'm the smartest kid she's ever known. Most of her books are about African American leaders, but I don't know what an African American is yet. They all look black to me. We read about George Washington Carver, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois. She also tells me about Martin Luther King. I learn that he starts college when he's fifteen, that he attends a black school in Atlanta called Morehouse, and that he has a doctorate by the time he's twenty-six. I don't hear much else because I'm still thinking about the black school in Atlanta. Where is Atlanta? And how is such a thing possible in America? Only black people, only people like me in a school? It seems an impossibility, but then I decide that the school, the city itself must be a relic of the past. My tutor smiles at me, her black hair shining. In her hands, the book looks brand new, like no one's ever opened it before. She turns the page. I don't know what's real and what's fake anymore.

After my tutoring sessions I join my brother in the nursery. We play together until Joy stops by to pick us up. Joy has long blonde hair and a jagged, ruined face. She is beautiful.

She takes us to the common room and my brother sits on her lap. We spend the afternoon watching TV shows like *The People's Court* and *The Judge*. Joy rubs my head constantly, and bends down to kiss my forehead during the commercials. I think she does this because she knows how much I miss my father. I haven't seen him since Mom took us away. She must know that I feel so alone without him, that I would give anything just to hear his voice.

Sometimes her friends join us. I only remember them in caricature. One is fat and one is skinny. Like a pair of mismatched twins they bounce around the room and my memory, orbiting around our small impromptu family. By the time Joy walks us to our room my brother has fallen asleep, and I'm too tired to be scared of Mom.

The fear returns when we arrive at our door.

7.

Sometimes Mom is better. I know she is taking her medicine now, and although she is never happy, she remembers herself.

This memory will never leave me: My brother and I walk into our small apartment in the shelter and look for Mom. I glance at our spotless kitchen on the left, and our spare living room on the right. A dusty table sits in the middle of the room. Mom steps out of

the bedroom; she is small and thin, and has large, wide-set eyes. Her nose is as small as a button. She turns on the radio, finds an oldies station, and begins to hum. Sometimes The Mamas and The Papas come on, sometimes The Rolling Stones, sometimes The Beach Boys, sometimes Simon and Garfunkel, sometimes Dylan, but always, inevitably, The Beatles. My Mom smiles whenever she hears Paul singing. It doesn't seem odd to me then, a Nigerian woman with a Beatles obsession; the only thing I care about is that The Beatles bring her joy. I often wish the disembodied voices would skip everything else and just play The Beatles, only The Beatles, all evening, so Mom will feel better.

Mom stops cooking Nigerian food when we get to the shelter. She will only prepare frozen food, but my brother and I don't care. We're always happy when we see her busy-ing herself in our tiny kitchen, opening the box of frozen fried chicken, the delicious rip of aluminum foil, placing the foil and chicken into the oven. Soon the savory fumes tunnel into our nostrils. She dumps a dollop of store-bought crab salad onto our plates, sometimes some fried rice from the local Chinese restaurant if she has extra money, and the fried chicken. Before we eat Mom switches off the radio, and if it's summer, the window is open, the breeze warming our backs.

To my mother, silence is love.

So we, in turn, learn to love silence. If our mother looks away as we walk in the door she is signaling her unending devotion to us. If she ignores us when we ask her a question she's actually telling us that we're smart enough to figure things out ourselves. If we call for her and she refuses to respond, we know she is hugging us all the same.

To my mother, awareness is anger.

If we feel her eyes on us while we're doing something we know to stop before she becomes angry. But sometimes we're too late. Her voice erupts in hot waves from her throat, foaming in spittle at the edges of her lips. Her voice rises to the ceiling and hangs there, hovering above everything, and her sweat drips from her forehead and we stare ahead, trying to show her our love with our silence. Sometimes she gets it, she receives it, and her anger dissipates above us and her sweat cools and sinks into her face, and then she smiles and everything becomes still.

Usually, though, she doesn't get it. She takes our silence personally, she forgets her lifelong lesson to us, and she yells until she's exhausted herself. Then she sits against the wall and cries herself to sleep. My brother and I carry blankets from our side of the room and cover her with them, and we burrow in on each side of her. This, too, is love.

## 8.

I dreamed constantly at the shelter. Dreaming was the same to me, no matter the time of day, whether my eyes were opened or closed. I could maintain a dream through the day if I woke myself up, so I tried to rise as early as possible each morning in order to preserve my connection to the other side.

I dreamed as I rubbed my eyes and went to the bathroom. I dreamed as I brushed my teeth and took a shower. I dreamed as I woke my mother and brother, as we started our day together.

I saw my father in the mirror as I brushed my teeth. He looked just like me, with his wide nose, his proud forehead. I nodded solemnly at him, and he nodded back. Instead of sitting on the floor with our food I saw that we were actually sitting on a brand new couch, and my father's favorite Sunny Ade record was playing, and our silence was laughter. When Mom pinched me up and down my back her hands became warm and supple. She embraced me through the punishment. Her slaps were a burst of hot water on my face. My tears were the drops trailing down my face after the water had hit the floor. Each slap made me clean. Her eyes seemed angry because they were so red. I reached forward with my magic eraser and erased all the red until her eyes were white again. When I was finished her anger was finished.

I flew, and I swam, and I dunked basketballs. No one ever took the time to tell me that I should differentiate between what I saw during the night and during the day, that I should privilege one over the other, so everything converged. I grew to believe that pain was temporary, that I was only a few steps from learning how to fly. I knew I would grow wings. It was only a matter of time.

9.

My brother and I didn't see our father for three months. After we arrived at the shelter Mom told us that our father would be coming to live with us soon. A few weeks into our stay, though, she told us that he didn't want to live with us anymore, so we probably wouldn't see him ever again. We didn't believe her. We knew too much about our father's love for us to believe that he had simply abandoned us.

One day, finally, the white lady with the freckles returned and told us we would be seeing Dad soon. She told us we would only be able to see him on weekends, because that's what the judge had said. Who is the judge we wondered. Don't worry, she replied, just know that you will be safe. We will protect you.

I had no idea what she was talking about. I had never felt unsafe with my father. I was upset that we didn't have a chance to speak with the judge. I wanted to go on TV and speak with Judge Wapner—I knew that if I had a few minutes with him I could convince him that our family needed to be together again.

We met Dad in the common area of the shelter. He was crying.

"How are you doing?" he asked us. How have you been? Have they been taking care of you?"

We were upset with him.

"Why didn't you come for us before? Why did you leave us here? Where were you?" we asked him.

Dad extended his hands helplessly, like he didn't know what to say.

"I don't know. I am here now."

My brother gave him a big hug, and I couldn't resist either. Dad held both of our hands and I turned around to see Mom stewing at us from the corner of the room. Dad told her he'd have us back by Sunday. Mom turned and walked away.



Our apartment felt strange though it looked exactly the same. Dad had even left our toys on the ground where we'd discarded them the morning we were taken to the shelter. For a moment we just stood there, looking at each other. Then Dad flipped on the TV and asked us to sit on his lap.

That Saturday Hulk Hogan looked into our living room and told us to eat our vitamins, say our prayers, and listen to our parents. He was so big. Then we saw him wrestle. He was fighting a large, fearsome opponent, and he was winning, but then another wrestler jumped into the ring and punched the referee. He punched Hulk. Hulk was down on the ground, grimacing in pain, and the mysterious wrestler disappeared. Hulk's opponent hit him repeatedly on the head, and then he pinned him. We were silent, my brother, Dad and I, as Hulk lay on the mat, bleeding, on the verge of losing the match. But then he reached his hand to the sky and began to shake it. He shook his hand until the power from the sky seemed to course through his fingers into his arms and into his body. He shook on the ground like a new force was inside him, and he rose slowly from the canvas. He kept shaking even as his opponent beat him on the face and the chest, and then he made a great fist of both of his hands and slammed it down on his opponent's back. His opponent collapsed, and a few moments later the newly revived referee raised Hulk's arm in victory. We cheered and hugged each other. After my father tucked us in that night I spent hours with my hand raised to the ceiling, waiting for the mysterious power to enter my body.

The next day we sat and talked, but in the evening Dad told us we would have to go back to the shelter. We begged him to let us stay for just a few hours more, but he said it wasn't possible. We bundled into the car and he drove us back. We saw Mom as we were walking in, and she took our hands without saying anything to Dad. We heard him talking behind us.

"Theresa, what are you doing?"

Silence.

"Why are you trying to take my kids away? Why are you breaking up our family?"

Silence.

## 10.

I don't remember talking much with my brother during this period. I'm sure we spoke often, but the words we exchanged are forever lost to me. I spent most of my time looking out for him. I shielded him whenever Mom reached for us in anger, and I talked to him under my breath through the long silences. I was glad that my mother took her anger out on me. I actually felt like a big boy when she raised my arm and pinched me down my side and back, gathering my skin between her nails and pressing as hard as she could each time. The welts were hot and red. Sometimes I counted them and wondered how many should have been for him.

After a while, though, I noticed that my mother stopped reaching for my brother altogether. She always lunged for me, even if she was angry with him.

And then she stopped being angry with my brother.

When she beat me she would sometimes call me by my father's name. I didn't know how to respond, and when I tried to tell her that I wasn't my father she beat me harder.

"Stop denying yourself," she would say between slaps.

"Stop trying to be something you aren't," she would say while pinching me.

I never told anyone what my mother was doing to me. I believed that my silence was a part of my maturity. If I told anyone, I would be admitting that I wasn't an adult. I don't know if my tutors ever suspected, but they were nicer to me as time passed; I received more hugs and kisses than any other kid in the shelter.

One night, after pinching me all over my back, Mom asked me if I loved her. I gave her a big hug and told my brother to join us. We sat there on the floor hugging for a long while, and then Mom told us that it was almost time for her to leave.

"Where are you going?" we asked her.

"I am too sick for this world," she said. "I won't be here for much longer."

"Will you take me with you?" my brother asked expectantly.

She shook her head slowly. "No. I wish I could, but no."

## 11.

About a week before it happened, Mom came into the living room and saw me sitting on the floor. I was exhausted. It was dark outside, and the window was open. My brother was sleeping on a mat on the other side of the room. Mom smiled as she approached me. A little of the moonlight touched her face.

I began to shiver because I thought she was going to hit me again. When she sat next to me I sneezed in fear. She raised her hand and I bowed my head, waiting for the hard sting of her hand against my face. Instead she rubbed my cheek, and I began to cry. I was so relieved.

"What is wrong with you?" Mom asked. I didn't respond. She held my hand. "I just want you to know, I don't hate you," she whispered. "I hate your father."

I didn't say a word.

"I hate him for bringing me here, and I hate him for giving me hope."

I nodded.

"But you're too much like him," she said. "And that is why you and I can never be friends."

I looked up at her.

"One day you will understand," she said. "Everything that I have done will make sense. You will see."

I nodded again. Mom kissed my cheek. Then she got up and left.

12.

Mom began to take her pills more frequently, soon every hour, and then every few minutes. One evening, while she was preparing our fried chicken, she dropped the package of aluminum foil on the floor, whirled around, and opened the cabinet next to the fridge. She pulled a new bottle of pills from inside, flipped the top, and shoved everything down her throat, cotton balls and all. I remember her choking on the cotton balls, and falling to her hands and knees to retrieve the pills she had spit up. She crawled on the floor, saliva dripping from her mouth, slurping the yellow and red pills from the wood floor like an anteater. My brother and I watched her until she was done. When she had slurped down the last pill she leaned her body against the wall and smiled at us.

“That was fun,” she said.

Then she started nodding off. My brother ran over to her and began tapping, then shaking her, so she would stay awake. The stove started smoking, big noxious fumes, and soon we were all coughing, except for Mom. I ran out of the room and looked for Joy.

Dad picked us up the following morning. When we arrived at our apartment he didn’t ask us any questions, he just told us to change our clothes. My brother and I became scared.

“Where are we going?”

“Don’t worry, just hurry up.”

I started to cry. My brother ran off to our bedroom. We were still traumatized by what we had seen the night before, the strangers bending over Mom, Joy whisking us away and telling us Mom was fine even though we had seen her lying still, cotton balls scattered around her. Dad called my brother back to the living room and smiled at us.

“Come on now! Get ready! I promise we’ll have fun!”

My brother and I changed and followed Dad to the car. We drove for a few minutes and then we stopped in front of my old school, the school I had attended for just a few weeks before Mom took us away. The school I hadn’t seen in almost a year.

“You will be going back there soon,” my father said, pointing. “Prepare yourself now. I expect both of you to be the best students in the school. There will be no excuses.”

We sat staring at the brick building. I read the sign in the parking lot, next to the flagpole. It said Happy Thanksgiving! School resumes November 28th.

Dad then drove us to the mall. He bought cinnamon rolls for us and we sat on a bench near a department store. We saw all the moms and dads bustling from store to store with massive bags beneath their arms, some carrying, others dragging their children behind them. We saw a fake star affixed to a fake tree, and fake snow that was spread all over the fake presents below. I knew better than to ask Dad about our own Christmas presents. We munched on our rolls.

Dad drove us back to the shelter the following week. Mom smiled weakly when she saw us.

“My sons. I have missed you.”

She hugged each of us, and she held me longer than usual.

“I am very sorry. I love you my child.”

She held our hands and we walked slowly back to our room.

“I have a very special surprise for both of you. Close your eyes.”

I felt her pushing something warm into my hands. I looked down and saw a plate with two pieces of oven-ready fried chicken, some green beans, Chinese rice, and a Santa Claus cookie on the side. He had an M&M nose and a beard of frosting.

We ate in silence.

13.

The courtroom was much bigger than I thought it would be. I couldn't imagine how they fit everything inside the TV. Everyone was quiet as my brother and I walked in. It was the first time I remember wearing a suit.

How did we get here? I cannot remember. There are too many pages of memory missing.

The judge was an old white man, but he wasn't Judge Wapner, or the judge from the other show we used to watch with Joy. He smiled at my brother and me.

"Don't be scared or nervous. We are all here because we want the best for you," he said.

Something happened after this, I'm not sure what. And then the judge slowly swings his head—a massive, bearded pendulum—back in our direction.

"This could go on forever," he says. "But I think you guys know who you want to be with. I can't promise that I will do as you ask me, but I will weigh your words very carefully."

My brother looks at me and I feel my face burning.

I look down at my shoes, and then I look up at the judge, his head shifting almost imperceptibly from left to right and back again, like it's keeping time.

"I want to stay with my father."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

"And you?"

We both look at my brother and he nods.

14.

Did we see our Mom again after the trial? I don't know. Sometimes when I close my eyes and travel back to that bewildering time I see her shaking her head at me, shooting me hateful glances as we pack our things from her room and leave the shelter for the last time. Usually, though, she isn't there. Not even her ghost greets me, not even a blast of cold air. She disappears from the narrative. She evaporates. My brother and I move back to our apartment in Bountiful and move on with our lives.

I am both ashamed and not ashamed to say that I did not miss her initially. I just wanted to fly away, to leave all my sadness behind.

15.

My mother lives in Nigeria now, and I know almost nothing about her life. Who she is, what she does, what she hopes to be. I haven't seen her since she left. I don't know if I'll ever see her again.

There are so many questions I would like to ask her.

When I think of her, now, I think of the old white lady who used to accompany me to school each day. This was before my mother took my brother and me to the shelter, before she lost herself in the haze of her illness. Mrs. Hansen lived in a small house down the street from our apartment, and she would appear at my side as I walked to school. She would tell me a bit about her life, her struggles, her pain, and then she would tell me about the afterlife, about all the wonderful things that would happen to her after she passed away. When I told my father that I wanted to serve her in heaven, he wringed his hands and shook his head. He told me I would serve no one but God, and then he called my mother and asked her to walk me to school the following day. "It'll be good for you to leave the house for a bit," he said to her.

As Mom, my brother, and I walked together Mrs. Hansen materialized beside us, and she told my mother that she, too, could serve her in heaven. Mrs. Hansen was senile, and much later I learned that she still subscribed to an old notion of the Mormon church, that black people, sons and daughters of Cain, could only get to heaven as servants.

Mom stopped and touched her face. She smiled warmly and told her that we would all be together in heaven as equals, all our earthy worries behind us forever, and wasn't that such a wonderful thing? Mrs. Hansen nodded, and then she smiled like something joyous and satisfying had just occurred to her. She slowly tottered away, and I never saw her again.

I remember Mom smiling triumphantly as we walked the rest of the way to school, her face lovely and calm. She seemed perfect to me then.