

Miss Sandra: Sunday, August 7, 2022

It was hard to say who was more handsome between Jordan and Rahman Gaffney-Bruce. Rahman was tall, dark, and smooth, like Miss Sandra's first husband, Billy. He was the more dapper of the two. Early in the mornings, he'd come out of his house in his dark suit, put on his expensive sunglasses, and strut to the car in his driveway. He had a swagger like Billy, too. Around his third time driving up the hill, he decided to smile and wave at the woman in her flowing caftan. She hadn't known how obvious it was that she'd been staring at him and daydreaming of her first love.

An inch shorter than Rahman with a wild afro and full beard, Jordan looked much more like Miss Sandra's second husband, Tommy. No matter how intense he looked while working from home, tapping furiously on his laptop on his front porch, he was still adorable, like a soft Frederick Douglass, or like a Monchhichi toy her children played with in the 80s. Adorable, but sexy. Both men were athletic, and she could only imagine the acrobatics they got into after hours.

When she saw them together, sweating profusely during their mid-summer move-in day, she knew not only that they were a couple, but that they *belonged* together. There was something about the way they looked at each other, especially when they thought the other wasn't looking: Rahman, like he was the luckiest man in the world; Jordan, like he still couldn't believe he'd gotten away with whatever he had to get away with to be with this man.

Miss Sandra trusted her gut—her *discernment*, as Miss Jennie once taught her. It was more than what she guessed or presumed. It was, instead, those feelings inside her that were already so complete and powerful that God must have put them there.

A few weeks after the two had moved in, that discernment led her to put one foot in front of the other and ring their doorbell. She had a bottle of vodka in hand. Her kids convinced her Ciroc was what the fancy people drank, but she wouldn't know—she was sold out on Rémy Martin since 1976.

The one who looked like Frederick Douglass answered the door.

“Oh...well hi!” he said. He was more jovial than Miss Sandra would have pegged him for.

“Hi! I’m Cassandra Lassiter, your neighbor across the street,” she announced.

“Jordan Gaffney-Bruce,” he said, extending his hand.

So formal, she thought.

“I noticed you and your...well I noticed you two moved in a few weeks ago, and, well, you know, back in the day we would have brought over a cake or a fruit basket, but people be just so...you know...*funny* about folk all in your business, so I said to myself ‘Now Sandra, leave them people alone, it’s a new day.’ But I just don’t have it in me, cuz we know each other around here on Slope, you know?”

“Slope?”

“Yeah, that’s what we call this neighborhood. From the bottom of the hill up to the houses on Bale, and Burr in the middle. I bet the real estate agent called it Grant Park, or tried to tell you this was Deanwood.”

“Well...yes, that’s exactly what she said,” Jordan laughed. “To be honest with you, Ms. Lassiter, I was hoping anybody would come say hi, but especially you.”

“Me?” she giggled.

“I see how all the kids around here respect you. They’re loud, but they hush and tighten up when they walk past your porch. And the older ones...I’m not a parent, but I can tell they adore you, too.”

“All this in just a few weeks of observing?” Miss Sandra blushed behind her chestnut brown skin.

“I work from home. Some folks watch the stories, I watch people. Hope that doesn’t make me sound like a stalker.”

“Chile, who’s the one ringing a stranger’s doorbell?” Miss Sandra laughed. “Anyway, this is for you. I hope you don’t mind me presuming y’all are drinkers.”

She extended her hand and presented Jordan with the slim bottle of Ciroc Summer Watermelon.

“Oh, indeed we are. Thank you so much for this! Better than a bottle of wine, that’s for sure. Won’t you come in?”

“Is your...is the other one home?”

Jordan cracked up on the inside. The nice older lady with gray cornrows did her best to be welcoming but still couldn't find the fortitude to say "husband" or even "partner" without potentially offending.

"The other one is Rahman. He's my husband. He's still at work."

"Oh, I thought so, chile. I just don't know what people are saying these days, and now I gotta learn extra pronouns, too. I'm a she/her, by the way. Chile, help an old lady keep up. I don't mean no harm. Anyway, no, I think I'll come back when he's at home. Don't want him to walk in and think I'm putting the moves on you."

She winked.

"Then I'll see you later, Ms. Lassiter."

"Oh, Miss Sandra will do," she sang as she floated away. He was devastatingly handsome, up close. Twenty years ago, with some persistence, she would have done everything she could to make him her next husband. But those days had passed. She'd entered her crone years with grace, as Miss Jennie had demonstrated years ago.

She thought of Miss Jennie often as she contemplated life in her retirement years. Even though the old lady was old when Miss Sandra was a girl, and she had been dead since the early 90s, it still felt like way too soon. She'd done so much for so many in so many ways that Sandra felt like she'd never be able to keep Slope together like Miss Jennie had.

She twisted her wedding bands while she walked, remembering what the lady had said to her after her second husband died.

"You've got choices, Cassandra, and leadership is always one of them. You don't have to be a President or a CEO. You don't have to be a General or an Admiral. But you do have to push through and prove to God that you can lead your family, despite this terrible loss."

"Why do I have to prove anything to God, Miss Jennie? Why can't I just be sad?"

"You don't *have* to prove anything to God. But...why wouldn't you *want* to?"

All these memories and not a single damn photo, Cassandra mused.



At 9:50 a.m. on Sundays, Miss Sandra walked out of her house and stepped ever-so-carefully down her wooden porch stairs, which were worn and slightly warped by the elements. Her seven children were long grown and mostly far away, with their own lives now, leaving her with her own sense of balance to trust as the stairs got more and more perilous with every passing year. She wasn't in bad health, and she wasn't falling apart, but she did notice the stiffness in her knees lasting longer and longer these days.

Her black and gray caftan whipped around her like a cyclone as her legs pumped up the hill. She covered her gray cornrows with a white turban and her gold bracelets jangled against each other. She carried a folding chair with her.

At the intersection of 57th and Burr Place, several of her neighbors were already assembled, seated in their own chairs. She nodded at the Jones family, with old Pops in his black suit and sophisticated wooden cane flanked by his daughter, Earnestine, and granddaughter. Pops nodded back and the women smiled.

About half a block up Burr Place, the baby of the family, Peek, pulled a metal barricade from between two houses, placing it in the middle of the street. The scrape from the metal against the asphalt echoed past the intersection, as Ziggy did the same. Peek was the spitting image of his great-grandfather: tall and lean with a sharp nose and piercing brown eyes, except Peek was a deep brown. Pops, in comparison, could pass for white under other circumstances. They both had soft, short curls, even though Pops' hairline had receded back to the civil rights movement, let his daughter tell it.

Peek sat behind his family, legs splayed and arms folded. Ziggy, who usually sat with his mother, joined Peek. Ziggy's hair was long, his bi-tone dreadlocks turning from black to blond as they passed his ears. He'd had a "fuckboy" haircut at the beginning of the pandemic: short at the sides, long on top, curly, and colored, but his discomfort at the risk of COVID infection at barber shops led him to take matters into his own hands, giving him a less polished look. He'd gone from mumble rapper to rock star in about two years: narrow hips, perpetual five o'clock shadow, and locs that hid his eyes depending on which way the wind blew.

Miss Sandra noticed Korey was still missing, as he had been since Gino died. It was bad enough the Gang of Four was now permanently three, but Korey's absence disconcerted her.

The Flythes shuffled to the square forming in the intersection under the sunny August sky. Close by them were the Warrens, the Pierces, and the Lamberts, with their stairstep children in front. They nodded and took their seats.

Miss Sandra looked at her Fitbit as 9:59 became 10:00. She looked up and locked eyes with Peek. She nodded.

He shook his head and looked at his lap. She continued to stare at him, so hard, in fact, that Ziggy looked up. He nudged Peek with his elbow. They both returned Miss Sandra's stare.

Bring your ass, she mouthed.

Peek sucked his teeth and exhaled. He rose, and his gangly limbs moved him from behind the second row of folding chairs like a brown praying mantis. He stood at a corner and stuffed his hands in his denim pockets.

She cleared her throat. Peek took his hands from his pockets and adjusted his posture.

“Slope gathers here...” The words caught in his throat, and he stopped, both in an effort to remember the words said at the beginning of their time together and to try and forget that the man who'd most recently said them was now dead.

“Take your time,” Miss Sandra whispered. But Peek didn't want to take his time. He wanted to fast forward through this meeting, past the funeral rites, past his GED graduation—whenever that would be—and past everything until he was no more and would have to think no more about anything, much less the horrors of his life, known and yet to be known.

He squinted, blinking dust or pollen or sadness from his eyes. One of the new gay dudes on 57th Street stepped out to his porch to water his plants. He didn't know him yet, but he liked him. He looked like the kind of dude who would answer the door to trick-or-treaters and play touch football with the boys on the block. He bet that dude knew where he came from, and because he did, he wouldn't try to change Slope just because he moved in.

Focus, dummy, he commanded of himself.

“Slope gathers here, at the intersection of our neighborhood, under the watchful eye of God, to experience His love directly. We sit in silence to wait on what God is saying to us. Preachers don’t tell us what God means. We listen to Him. The Bible gives us a road map, but we know—as everybody in Slope knows—that our understanding of God evolves every day. What we knew yesterday may be different tomorrow. Just like...just like the people we love who were here yesterday might be gone tomorrow...so please, wait in silence with us, and speak if God is trying to tell you something.”

Miss Sandra beamed with approval. Peek’s shoulders slouched and he returned to his seat.

The meeting was completely silent that day, to no one’s surprise. The grief’s humidity hung in the air like molasses, making the hour together feel longer and heavier than it needed to. Sandra spent a lot of time thinking about old Miss Jennie, and what she might have said if she was here, but she found that she could not, as things were never this bad when Miss Jennie was alive.



A few hours later, after hands had been shaken and families departed to enjoy the rest of their Sunday, Miss Sandra cooked a meal fit for kings back in her empty house. Her many children, spread throughout the country, called and FaceTimed her to check in and hear the latest gossip.

“Say hi to Grandma,” her youngest son, Qiang, said to his tribe of kids. They babbled in unison from Qiang’s Upper Marlboro backyard. He stopped coming to Sandra’s house so he could see all his children at one time at his own place, once a week.

“Aww, Grandma’s babies so cute,” she cooed. They quickly disengaged from their father’s arms and continued their loud playtime on their dad’s acre of lush lawn.

Qiang’s high cheekbones hid his eyes. His smile was widest when he was with his kids.

“And you don’t know nothing about what happened?” Miss Sandra asked quietly while stirring a pot on her stove. His smile faded.

“Nothing, Ma. Streets is quiet. Them kids ain’t in nothing that would be on my radar.”

“Ain’t nothing gon’ be right until we find out who did it, Qiang.” Her son knew by the usage of his full name, not ‘Key’ and not ‘Baby Boy’ that she was serious.

“I know, Ma. Gino deserved better. I know he was your favorite.”

“Ain’t got no favorites. Just lights that shine bright enough to notice.” Qiang smiled.

“I’ll see you Thursday, Ma. And be careful out there.”

“You be careful, too. Love you.”

As soon as she ended her call, a knock rattled the bars of her front storm door. She wiped her hands on a dish towel and hurried to the door.

Another woman would have been scared to see a man in a black hooded sweatshirt peering into her house, but she knew it was Korey.

“Hey,” she said softly.

“Hey Miss Sandra,” he replied. His eyes were on fire, but then again, they always were. Korey could very rarely hide his true emotions from anyone, even his friends.

“I’m glad to see you. Come in.” She unlocked the door and let Korey in. He pulled his hood down and revealed his unshaven face and silver stud earring. He’d seen better days, but she wouldn’t dare say so.

“How you holding up?” she asked. He shrugged.

“It’s okay to be sad.”

Korey rolled his eyes. He took out his phone and scrolled through Instagram. Miss Sandra couldn’t see what he was looking at or looking for. She was used to these kids using their phones as security blankets. Miss Sandra leaned against the railing of her staircase and stared.

“I’m not sad,” Korey finally said, looking into her eyes.

“Okay. Why not?”

“I don’t wanna talk about it, and I ain’t staying.” He shrugged again.

“Korey, stay.”

“No.”

“It’s family dinner.”

“I don’t care about none of that. Not now.”

“I know you miss your friend.”

“He wasn’t my friend. He wasn’t never my friend. If it’s one thing I don’t do, it’s that fake shit.”

“Korey, don’t be this way. Y’all were inseparable. ‘Gang of Four,’ right? That’s just the pain talking.”

Korey walked to her.

“I gotta get outta here. I can’t breathe. And I don’t wanna see none of their fake asses. Bye, Miss Sandra.”

Korey pecked her on the cheek and quickly turned around. He left the house, and breezed past Jordan and Rahman on the steps.

“Scu’mé,” he muttered, minding his manners even in his agitated state.

Jordan and Rahman looked at each other, shrugged, and climbed the remaining stairs to Miss Sandra’s porch while Korey hurried down the street.

“Don’t mind Korey. He was friends with the boy that got killed. He just need to get his head together,” she explained.

“Understood,” Rahman said softly.

“Miss Sandra, this is my husband, Rahman,” Jordan said. Rahman smiled, showing off years of orthodontic work and a meticulous teeth whitening regimen.

“Do you hug?” she asked.

“We got all our shots!” Rahman announced.

“Me too, chile! Make sure y’all get that monkeypox one, too. Shoot, if it ain’t one thing, it’s another, ain’t it? Miss ‘Rona finna get two legs and start walking if we ain’t too careful.”

She hugged both men.

“I baked a cake!” Jordan said, one note shy of being pleased with himself.

“Now I said you didn’t need to bring anything!” Miss Sandra playfully chastised.

“I think you’ll like my pound cake. It’s my mother’s recipe,” he said.

“Well shut your mouth and keep on talking,” she said, salivating at the prospect of a sweet treat for dessert. She beckoned the men inside her house. Jordan immediately noticed all the graduation photos decorating the off-white wall, leading from the foyer all the way up the staircase. So many photos of children in caps and gowns adorned the wall that Jordan presumed she might have been a teacher in a former life.

Rahman noticed the framed photos as well but quickly turned his attention to the pristine living room, unironically decorated in mid-century

modern furniture: wood end tables and a coffee table bent in futuristic, smooth shapes; a love seat, sofa, and chair in matching velveteen green. The carpet was shag, in a shade of orange that reminded Rahman of the Tennessee Volunteers.

“You like it? My parents spent a whole paycheck trying to get a modern living room. Finally did it right before I went to secretary school. I wanted to replace it after they died, but by the time I got around to it, this was back in style.”

“Crazy how that works,” Rahman remarked.

“Yeah. Finally took the plastic off last year.”

Jordan stifled a laugh.

“Hey look, we still Black, right?” Miss Sandra laughed.

“We sure are,” Jordan said.

“Bring me that cake and y’all sit down to the dinner table. You early. Kids be through shortly.” She grabbed the cake from Jordan and took it to the kitchen. Jordan and Rahman followed her and stopped in the dining area. She leaned over the partition between the rooms.

“Everybody feeling a little raw since Gino got killed, you know. But I figure it’s still a good time for y’all to come by. These kids need to see more, you know?”

“See more of what?” Jordan asked.

“This neighborhood...it’s good, you know? I know you know. Y’all wouldn’t pay as much as you did for a house in a *bad* neighborhood. It’s good, but these kids don’t have a lot of role models right here. A lot of the men with any sense leave. All my sons did. They want more for themselves. They want a real yard, room for their own kids to play, access to good schools. Ain’t no incentive to stay in their parents’ house in Slope. So, folks die, and they sell.”

“But you didn’t sell. You’re still here,” Jordan said.

“The Spirit say so, chile. I just can’t leave. Can’t afford to fix the place up enough to sell it. And where could I go, anyway? I can’t get enough on this house to live how my son living out Upper Marlboro, or my daughter down Atlanta. But this home anyway, you know? God said stay put, so I stay put.”

She disappeared and pots and pans rattled for a few moments. Rahman leaned over and whispered to Jordan as he put his hand on his thigh.

“God say stay put, heard?”

Jordan smiled and brushed Rahman’s hand away.

“Y’all from here? Prolly not, huh?” Miss Sandra called out.

“The Bronx and Dorchester, Massachusetts,” Rahman shared.

“Lemme guess...you from the Bronx and Jordan is from Dorchester.”

“You got it! How did you know?”

“New Yorkers got they chest puffed out all the time. I see you walking around the neighborhood all confident.”

“Well damn, read me then,” Rahman laughed.

“That ain’t a bad thing! You just got a little swagger, that’s all. Now Jordan—he’s got that true northerner, mind-his-own-business vibe. Relaxed. Stays in his lane. But I know you don’t miss a beat.”

“Read me, too,” Jordan laughed.

“So how did Dorchester and the Bronx end up in Slope?”

“We met in college,” Rahman said.

“Oh! Where’d you go?”

“Penn,” Jordan said.

“Oh, that’s nice! My baby girl got in there, but she said she ain’t wanna be in the snow in the winter. She went to Spelman instead. So y’all been together since college?”

The temperature in the room dropped a degree and Jordan and Rahman’s shoulders tensed up.

“Rahman was a few years ahead of me,” Jordan began, trying to explain the long version of the story.

“The timing was wrong. Until it wasn’t anymore,” Rahman said, rushing to the abbreviated conclusion. Jordan rolled his eyes just a few millimeters, but Miss Sandra caught it.

“But y’all got it together. All’s well that ends well, right?”

Jordan nodded slowly.

“How many kids do you have, Miss Sandra?” Rahman asked.

“Dozens, if you count the Slope kids. But seven of my own, between two dead husbands and a deadbeat baby daddy. You?”

“Two. Both in college in New York. One’s about to finish and the other just started.”

“Oh, so you a daddy and Jordan a stepdaddy!”

Jordan shook his head vigorously.

“I’m just Jordan.”

“Hmm. Not sure why I’m getting all this daddy energy from you,” she said.

“Well, I call him—” Rahman began.

“So, what’s for dinner, Miss Sandra?” Jordan’s tight jaw and raised eyebrows begged for a change in subject. Miss Sandra obliged.

“Barbeque chicken wings, ham, collard greens, string beans, candied yams, macaroni and cheese, and cornbread. And some of your poundcake for dessert!”

“I approve of that.” Ziggy’s lazy baritone cut through the air as he entered the house. A bevy of teenagers and young adults came through the open front door, led by Ziggy, wearing a plain white sleeveless t-shirt and low-slung skinny jeans, with a sparkly belt and high-top sneakers. He wore a custom baseball cap with puffy silver glitter paint spelling out NEDC on the front.

“Well, I’m glad you approve, Mr. COO. Now where the CEO at?”

“CEO dead, ma.”

“You know what I mean, chile,” Miss Sandra sighed.

“It’s the CEO, Chairman of the Board, COO, and CFO. Gino was always the CEO. Peek is the Chairman of the Board. I’m Ops and Korey the money man.”

“Okay, chile, okay. Where is Peek?” Miss Sandra received hugs and kisses from the half-dozen young folks crowding her house.

“On the way with Pops.”

“Okay, good. Now say hi to Mr. Gaffney-Bruce.”

“Which one?”

“They both Mr. Gaffney-Bruce.”

“They don’t look like brothers.”

“They *married*, Ziggy.”

“Oh. Why you ain’t say that?”

Ziggy sauntered to the dining room while Jordan and Rahman rose.

“Hi. I’m Ziggy.” He extended his hand.

“Jordan Gaffney-Bruce. This is Rahman Gaffney-Bruce.”

The men exchanged handshakes. Unlike many of the students Rahman worked with, Ziggy had a tight grip and a presence akin to confidence. He knew immediately this guy would have been Jordan’s type back in the day: something between Quavo and Basquiat. If Jordan hadn’t

been so possessed with his own sense of morality, he probably could have bagged Ziggy, if either were willing.

“Y’all just moved into that house across the street, right?” Ziggy asked.

“Sure did!” Rahman said, trying to quell his jealousy even as Jordan loosened. His mind had wandered to the place where he’d lost his husband, again. Jordan was usually the insecure one, but the mood struck Rahman occasionally.

“Oh, my bad, let me introduce you to my girls. That’s Audree, Pooh, Laurie, La’Naya, and Twinkie.”

“Heyyyy,” they purred in unison, then giggled. Jordan couldn’t figure out whether Ziggy was “in the life” as the old gays said, or if this was his harem. Gay men and pimps both had a penchant for surrounding themselves with beautiful women, and so far, he couldn’t tell.

“We’re so sorry to hear about your friend,” Jordan said.

“Thank you, Mr. Gaffney-Bruce,” Ziggy said. “That means a lot. Gino was one of a kind.”

“I’m hongry, Miss Sandra,” Twinkie purred.

“Now you know we don’t start ‘til Pops get here. You might as well gon’ out back and do what you do ‘til he get here. Y’all know better to come this early anyway. This the grown folk’s hour.”

“Miss Sandra, everybody here over 20! Come on, now!” Twinkie argued.

“Mmm-hm, over 20 and not a diploma among you.”

“Not yet. You know we all close,” Laurie said.

“Almost don’t count. I need to see GEDs and degrees. Now go on out back and chill out. I’ll let you know when we ready to eat.”

Rahman noticed the jay Ziggy produced from behind his ear. He led the way to the small backyard beyond the kitchen.

“Ain’t that something?” Miss Sandra asked anyone who would listen.

“At least they respect you,” Rahman offered.

“Ain’t nobody else left to respect. That’s what I was getting at earlier. These kids...their parents ain’t shit. Most of ‘em grew up in the 80s when this city was a damn war zone. Dodging bullets on the way home from school. Crack pipes in the streets. The lucky ones got out. The unlucky ones got pregnant early and didn’t know how to raise kids, so they didn’t.

Ziggy mother on that heron. Father been dead now longer than he was ever alive. A knucklehead. But shit, so were my husbands.”

Miss Sandra began putting the food on the table. She shooed Jordan and Rahman away when they offered to help, so they sat there patiently.

“I grew up here, in this house, knowing that my parents wanted more for themselves than what they came from down Virginia. DC meant everything to them. Opportunity. Culture. I got all that. But there’s that other side to DC that comes with all the opportunity. Something faster. Something bigger. Something more. We all just want a love like the movies.”

She sat her pristine Corelle serving dishes on silver warmers. Steam rose from the vegetables.

“I think that’s what y’all really got. I can tell.”

“Maybe so,” Jordan said wistfully.

“You’re so lucky. I was young and dumb. Marrying men with big cars and big money and not stopping to think or ask questions. But they made me feel good. But the 80s, man...the 80s.”

“How did your kids make it out?”

“I had my foot on they neck! I accepted nothing less than As in my house. And I never had to beat my kids, either. I got beat. I had worse things than that done to me. But I knew there was another way. God told me. And I did what He said. Gave them tough love, but love regardless. And now, between my seven kids? Eleven degrees. My oldest is a PhD. Qiang got a degree, too, even though he running these streets at his big age.”

“Qiang?” Jordan asked politely.

“My two babies are half Chinese. Once I was done with the hustlers, I called myself falling in love with the man who ran the corner store. He ain’t never tell me about his wife. That’s my excuse for Mei-Hui. He ain’t never tell me he was married, and he never wore a ring. No excuse for Qiang, though. I knew by then and didn’t care. I guess that’s why he turned out how he did. Oh, he smile in my face and bring me gifts. But I know he be out here.”

“You are a fascinating woman, Miss Sandra,” Jordan said.

“Chile you just as charming as you wanna be, you betta stop before I steal you away from your man.”

“If anybody could, I bet it would be you,” Rahman laughed.

The iron storm door rattled, and Pops entered with Peek. They shared the same down-turned nose, high cheekbones, and broad shoulders. Pops wore a dark suit and wide-brimmed straw hat. He walked with a cane but didn't appear to need it much. He took his hat off, exposing a balding head of soft and curly salt and pepper hair. Peek's hair was similarly soft, but thicker, crowning a much darker shade of brown than his great-grandfather's "high yellow" skin.

"Hey, Pops!" Miss Sandra exclaimed.

"Hey, sugar!" Pops said. His honey-coated southern drawl had been dragged along a gravely road, but he was spry and glad to be in the number.

"Hey, Miss Sandra," Peek said softly.

"Hey, my baby." She hugged him tightly. "You did so good at worship today," she said.

"Thank you. Oh, hey," he said with a small wave as he noticed the Gaffney-Bruces.

"This is Mr. Jordan Gaffney-Bruce and Mr. Rahman Gaffney-Bruce. They the ones bought the house across the street."

"Oh, okay. Nice to meet you." He shook their hands.

"Same to you, young man. Very sorry to hear about Gino, by the way," Rahman said. Pained at the mention of his friend's name, Peek mustered a head nod as he backed away.

"You heard that, Pops?" Miss Sandra asked in an elevated voice. "This is the couple that moved in across the street, the Gaffney-Bruce family."

"Say what now?" he asked.

"These men bought the Franklin house. They're married."

Pops paused and gave the men a once-over glance.

"Oh. Well, God bless America."

"Nice to meet you, Mister..."

"Jones. But everybody calls me Pops, so I guess you can, too. Or Mr. Jones. Or Tyrone. Getting too old to be worried about it either way. What's for dinner, sugar?"

Miss Sandra repeated the menu as she guided Pops to the head of the table.

"Peek, Ziggy and the girls are out back. Could you go get them and then come say grace?"

He sucked his teeth.

"Ain't gonna be too many more clicks, Peek. Time to take the lead."

He grumbled, and then leaned out of the kitchen door, calling on his friends to come eat. They filed back in, red-eyed and hungry.

“Hey, Pops,” they said, greeting the patriarch of Slope.

“We used to hold hands and pray, but we just stand quietly now, since corona,” Peek explained to Rahman and Jordan.

“Heavenly Father, we thank you for allowing us to be together one more time. Bless this food and the hands that prepared it. In Jesus’ name...”

“Amen,” everyone said in unison.

As dinner progressed, Jordan giggled at how all of the people who smoked simply rocked in their seats and savored every bite in silence, while Pops and Miss Sandra bantered about. Rahman noticed Peek was in his own world, neither engaged in the grown folks’ conversation nor paying any attention to his friends.

“Do your kids ever come to Sunday dinner?” Rahman asked Miss Sandra.

“Nah. Christmas, sometimes, but the house isn’t big enough to fit everyone. I go to them, mostly. But Qiang comes by every Thursday. Our little tradition. Have your kids come to see you yet?”

“They’re not keen on DC,” Rahman answered quickly. Jordan thought he imperceptibly rolled his eyes, but once again, Miss Sandra caught them.

“I see,” she said softly.

“Everybody likes DC, especially when you’re college age. They just don’t want to see me,” Jordan said.

“That’s not true,” Rahman rebutted.

“Okay.” Jordan’s “okay” was never the end of an argument, but the beginning of a cold war that could last days if Rahman didn’t play whatever diplomatic game Jordan needed him to play that day.

“It’s a nice house. Your kids will love it, especially if the basement is still what I remember. Them Franklins could throw down back in the seventies. A full bar in the corner. Enough room to have a real house party. You remember them days, Pops?”

“Mmm-hm, sure do. Used to have to drag Earnestine out of there by her ear...then come back so I could drink my damn self.”

Miss Sandra laughed heartily and then sighed.

“Those were the days,” she said. Peek put his fork on his plate and made enough noise that Rahman noticed.

“I’ll be back,” he said. He excused himself from the table and stepped out the front door, carefully closing it behind him.

“He’ll be okay. He’s just hurting,” Miss Sandra said.

“He wants to go to Westhampton,” Pops announced.

“Westhampton County? Why he wanna go there? Y’all never took him before. Hell, you talk so bad about it—”

“Hush. He wanna go. He can go. Let him learn.” Pops had a tone which suggested that this subject was closed.

“Is there a funeral for Gino scheduled yet?” Rahman’s question broke the silence.

“We don’t do funerals around here,” Twinkie said.

“No?”

“Nah,” Ziggy interjected. “No funeral, no bodies, and absolutely no preachers.”

“Then how do you say goodbye?” Jordan asked.

“Same way we do things on Sundays—you ain’t been to worship yet?”

“Is that what you call your prayer meetings?”

“I mean I guess so. We say worship. It’s prayer. It’s church without the church. We just be together. So, yeah. This Friday evening. You’ll see.”

“Then we’ll be there,” Jordan declared.

“Fo’ sho.”

Yet another figure opened the door. Her formal Metropolitan Police Department uniform stretched against her hips. Her dreadlocks were tied in a bun at the back of her head.

“Hey y’all, sorry I’m late! The press conference ran over, of course. You know your mayor likes to talk. And then the line at the Shoppers was crazy, as usual.”

“Hey Royce!” Miss Sandra said. Rahman tensed a little at the sight of law enforcement.

“How you doin’, I’m Royce,” the officer said to Jordan and Rahman. They began to push their chairs back.

“Nah, please. Don’t get up. I’m the late one. Welcome to Slope—I’ve seen y’all around.”

“Thank you,” the men said in unison.

“Peek not joining us? I saw him outside on the corner.”

“What was he doing?” Miss Sandra asked.

“Nothing, really. Minding his business like he be doin’?”

“That’s the best we can hope for, I guess. All things considered,” Pops said.

She was glad Royce came. Her ability to be the grand dame of Slope had petered out and the small talk nearly killed her. The language of the young folks got louder as it dripped with their own urban dialect, becoming more foreign to Miss Sandra with each passing day. What was “bumpin’” in her day was now “bussin’”—which used to be what guns did just a decade before. And somehow, guns were now “glizzies,” but hot dogs were “glizzies” also.

Gino would have been hip and would have translated for her.

“Not hip, Miss Sandra. *Sharp*,” Gino would have said. She giggled to herself.

Gino was dead. Korey was in the wind.

Her giggle stopped as reality set in. She floated through the evening, even as the Gaffney-Bruces got more comfortable in their learning all about Slope and the various families. She laughed, she looked, and she checked in, but she was no longer present.

Peek quietly came back in and picked at his plate some more.

“When we gon’ talk, Peek?” Royce asked softly.

“Ain’t nothing to say,” he mumbled. Royce wiped her mouth.

“Thank you, Miss Sandra,” Ziggy said. His harem knew it was time to glide to the corner, to hang out, to start using more cuss words, to play music on their phones, and to remember. Peek would join them, eventually. Pops sauntered off to the living room to watch the baseball game.

“I guess we should call it an evening, too,” Rahman announced.

“Everything was lovely, Miss Sandra. Truly,” Jordan said.

“Same time next week?” She asked hopefully.

“I’d like that,” Jordan said. He noticed Miss Sandra’s eyes glistening. Something more than sorrow hung heavy in the air, but he couldn’t put his finger on it. It felt like a family dinner, truly, but it was also like she was begging them not to go at all.

Royce was already on the stoop, leaning against the post while Peek stole away from the house, like a cat. He walked up the hill to his

colleagues. The heaviness hit them all now and wrapped itself around their necks like the August humidity.

Miss Sandra saw the young adults as themselves, then as people, then as paper dolls, then as her own children, then as ghosts—things pretending to be alive but were quite dead in almost every way that mattered. She was not alive, but she was, but then she wasn't again. This neighborhood, a utopia for so many, for so long, now was little more than a graveyard.

Peek looked back at the four adults on the stoop. Royce, the warrior. Miss Sandra, the mother. Jordan and Rahman. Who would they be? He stared, then turned his attention back to his friends, trying to feel alive for one second more.

“For the hours they in school, they ain’t dead. They ain’t dying. For the hours they with me, they ain’t dead. They ain’t dying. I pray to God every day to cover these babies, but sometimes I think the prayers only stretch two blocks. Maybe that’s why ain’t been no murders in this neighborhood for decades. Look it up. You’ll see. Some of the safest blocks in Washington besides 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. But when they leave these blocks...”

Miss Sandra choked up. Royce rubbed her back and the tears fell.

“I’m sorry,” the matriarch whispered.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” Jordan said. “We’re here.”

He didn’t know why he’d said it. But they were here, just trying to breathe like everybody else.