

The Pencil Test

By James Guilford

(Excerpt)

Note to readers:

This is an advance copy.

Text will appear differently in actual novel.

Those categories which were meant to define and control the world for us have boomeranged us into chaos; in which limbo we whirl, clutching the straws of our definitions.

—James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” in *Notes of a Native Son*

...[Officials used a pencil test to classify some coloured people as black and others as white. Race classification was dependent on whether the pencil slid out of your hair (that made you white) or got stuck (which made you officially black).

—Nosimilo Ndlovu, “The 21st century pencil test,”

Mail & Guardian, June 28, 2009

CHAPTER ONE

You're A Winner!

T*riggers*. That's what Dr. Higgman calls them, those deadly details scattered about Kendry's world. When Kendry stumbles upon one of her triggers, they don't explode. They skid across the floor, beep their countdown, and then hiss out clouds of rage.

Sunday's trigger was Doris and the television remote. Specifically, it was the way Doris tapped the remote against her knee, the way she held it to her chin, and the way she flicked through the channels with her nubby thumb.

Yesterday's trigger was Doris at the dinner table. It was the way she chewed her sleeve, the way she gnawed at her nails, the way she sat across from Kendry, groveling and hollow-checked, un-eating as always.

Trip. Skid. Hiss.

Sunday. The remote control yanked from Doris's hand and chucked out of the second-floor window. Wires and plastic splayed on the sidewalk like a suicide.

Yesterday. The plates snatched from the kitchen table and flung across the room. Noodles oozing down the wall like magma.

Today's trigger? The calendar.

Kendry spies it, newly hung over the mantle. The calendar is Doris's attempt at sprucing up to hide the fact of the recently pawned clock and television. The calendar, a freebie from Doris's former job, hangs from a yellow pushpin. A stallion gallops across

the top half of the calendar. Below the stallion, a caption written in frilly script announces, *You're a Winner!*

The calendar reminds Kendry that today is Tuesday. Kendry hates Tuesdays; she hates doing what she has to do.

And if the calendar isn't enough of a reminder, here comes Doris, tottering in high heels that click like gunfire on the stone floors. Doris dusts dustless tables and folds folded towels. Through all of her flustering and blustering, Doris straightens her wrinkled pants suit, smooths her raging hair, and smiles her cashier-at-gunpoint smile.

Kendry sits in the living room with her thumbs stuck in her ears. She shakes her legs (Click. Clack. Click. Clack.) She bites her bottom lip. (*You're a Winner!*) She grinds her teeth and gathers explosive strength.

Doris clacks across the room and sits next to Kendry.

"What?" Kendry says. She bites off the *t* in *what*, making it scissor sharp.

"Kendry?" Doris reaches to stroke Kendry's hair. "Kendry? Baby?"

"Doris, stop." Kendry swats Doris's hand away. "And don't even attempt to apologize. I'm sick to death of it."

"I thought we agreed you wouldn't call me that?"

"It's your *name*, isn't it?" Kendry says. She throws her bag over her shoulder and marches to the door. "Let's just get this over with," Kendry says.

Doris stays seated.

"*Mother*," Kendry's eyes blaze. "Aren't you coming?"

"I have a meeting." Doris sucks air through her teeth and scrunches her face as if bracing against a douse of water. "You'll have to—"

"Take the train again," Kendry says, "like I'm some goddamn plebian? Whatever, Doris. Whatever."

CHAPTER TWO

Hi Man

Doris found the pills. Bottles and bottles of them, four months worth, lined up in the far corner on Kendry's closet shelf. This was before Doris had begun to sell their possessions. Things hadn't gotten that bad.

Each morning, after Kendry left for school, Doris slipped into Kendry's room and pilfered Kendry's medication. The pills helped Doris get through on the days she could not score anything hard or when she had important meetings and needed a little kick, a little boost. One pill became two, then five, and then an entire bottle until, on an unseasonably cold, September morning, Kendry searched her closet shelf—hunting for her favorite sweater—only to see light shooting through the corridors of her once-full bottles.

Kendry pronounced an end to her Tuesday sessions.

"You can't stop going," Doris said. "I forbid it."

"Forbid it?" Kendry scoffed. "Oh, please!"

The standoff lasted two weeks.

Doris broke first.

"Mommy needs them," Doris said. "Just to keep me going. Just to get through this slump. The market's dead right now and I have five houses to move." Doris's voice wobbled like a warped record. "Please, baby," Doris crooned. "Please, for mommy."

Inside, Kendry shuddered. Seeing her mother talk like this was like looking down at Doris from the lip of a deep pit. It was like watching a brain-damaged version of Doris, a drooling and helpless woman braying like a donkey and soiling herself.

“Alright,” Kendry said. “Just shut the hell up.”

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Last year, Crestman Prep teachers agreed: Kendry needed therapy. “Despondent,” her progress reports read. “Aloof.” “Barely speaks above a whisper in class.” A week or so after the second round of freshman progress reports, Doris found Kendry in tepid bath water with her wrists gurgling blood. Doris rushed Kendry to Northside Medical where a friend of Doris’s patched Kendry up and agreed to keep Kendry’s suicide attempt under wraps.

Doris asked her friend to recommend a therapist. Doris wanted someone discreet, someone “sensitive to such matters.” She also wanted someone far away from Buckhead, someone her clients would never *ever* run into. As one of the top realtors in Atlanta, selling million-dollar homes to neurologists and rock stars, Doris had an image to maintain. She followed a friend’s recommendation of Dr. Higgman because his office was located in East Atlanta in an all-black neighborhood. Surely, Doris thought, it was a place none of *her* clients frequented.

When Doris announced Kendry’s Tuesday appointments, Kendry shrugged her shoulders and kneaded the bandages on her wrists. “Whatever, Doris,” she said. “Wha*T*-ever.”

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In the beginning, Dr. Higgman attempted to do his job. He asked Kendry questions to draw her out and build trust between them. Kendry sat in the oversized leather chair with her arms crossed and her legs tucked beneath her, drawn into herself like a mollusk. Her hair gathered around her face in its usual storm of curls. She stared at Higgman as if in a face-off—her green-brown eyes challenging his cataract blues.

Dr. Higgman pointed to Kendry’s wrists, “How did that happen?”

“Running with scissors,” Kendry said. “How the hell do you think?”

“Why?” Dr. Higgman’s eyes grew wide—with mockery or concern, Kendry couldn’t tell.

“I don’t know,” Kendry said. “Love for life.”

“Kendry,” Higgman sighed. “I’m here to help you. But I can only work with what you give me. And, right now, you’re not giving me much.”

The folds of Higgman’s face made Kendry want to believe him, believe *in* him, believe he had the power to heal her. The deep cleft in his chin made Kendry want to tell him about the hollowness—that cool black chasm—swirling in the center of her chest.

But she didn’t.

“I’m ugly and unpopular,” Kendry said instead. “My life sucks, so I tried to kill myself.” She propped her chin on her knees, shrugged her shoulders, and flashed a tight smile, “The end.”

Still, Higgman wanted to know more.

So Kendry mentioned the father she never knew and the only memory of him: the cuff of a bright shirt rearing back to slap Doris. Kendry told Higgman about the deceased grandparents. No aunts or uncles, her mother being an only child. Kendry told him about Samantha Klieg, the one person at Crestman Prep Kendry could call a friend. At first, Sami had been cruel, sliding fat jokes under Kendry’s locker door and then giggling from a distance with the other pretty girls as they watched Kendry read the notes. Kendry told Dr. Higgman that she knew she wasn’t fat, not by a long shot. She just wasn’t skinny, or pretty, or popular like Samantha.

She told Higgman how, one evening, she had returned to the gymnasium to find her Algebra binder and spied Sami behind the bleachers kissing Mr. Stemma. Bradley, as Sami called him, was the teaching assistant from Dekalb College. He had his back to Kendry, but Sami saw Kendry. Their eyes met. After that, an unspoken truce sprung up between the two girls. Samantha left no more notes, and she stopped the other pretty girls from laughing at Kendry. She even spoke to Kendry in the hallway. Kendry told Higgman that, in exchange, she kept Sami’s secret about Mr. Stemma.

Of course, Kendry excluded some things. She left out her mother’s drug habit, Madison’s “favors,” and the black girls on the train. Kendry left out the way she coiled up

the humiliation she suffered during the day and released it—that hot whip of spite—at home, at Doris and at herself.

Dr. Higgman stroked the silver stubble on his chin. His blue eyes dulled with each anecdote. He had heard it all before—rich girls gone wild, absentee parents, too much money and too little love. He had moved his practice out of Buckhead in hopes of escaping these depressed debutants, in hopes of working with less fortunate, but more remediable patients. And still, the Dorises and Kendrys of the world ferreted him out.

Higgman prescribed Prozac and Adderall. He also gave her samples of another drug. “My private stash,” he said with a wink. After each hourly session with Dr. Higgman, Kendry tucked the pills into her pocket and tromped out of his office.

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Six months later, Kendry continues to visit Dr. Higgman. Higgman has given up his probing since Kendry told him he could save his psychobabble for someone who gave a rat’s ass.

“Let’s face it, Higgy, I’m a loser,” Kendry said from the leather chair. By this time, Higgman and Kendry had become comfortable with one another. Higgman had ceased putting on his spectacles and sports coat before Kendry entered, and Kendry had learned to sit normally, to relax her shoulders and unfurl her eyebrows.

“Sami, my dad, and my toilet bowl of a social life—all that crap’s got me irreparably screwed.” Kendry looked into Higgman’s face and thought she saw something that resembled agreement. “Just give me my happy pills, and I promise I won’t go for my wrists anymore.”

Higgman looked out of the window, took a deep breath, and then slid Kendry’s pills across the table like a final offer.

Nowadays, Higgman sits in the leather chair and solves sudoku while Kendry reads the patient files on his computer. Sometimes Higgman nods off. Sometimes he tells anecdotes about his frat-boy days. Sometimes Higgman’s wife, Irene, shows up in his absence. Irene brings butterscotch hard candies and sips gin and Fresca from a Happy Mother’s Day mug. Kendry helps herself to the pills when Irene substitutes for her husband.

Today, Kendry leans in to admire Irene's knitting. It is a knotted purple scarf.

"That's kind of pretty," Kendry says.

"Really?" Irene says. "I could get more yarn. Knit you one."

"Nah, that's okay." Kendry slips her hand into the desk and takes a bottle of Adderall. "Not my look. But it's pretty." She even manages a smile.

"One more for the road," Irene says and then presses a second bottle of pills into Kendry's palm. "This one's on me."

• • •

As Kendry exits the storefront office, she looks back at the dingy painted window. "D R. H I M A N" it reads. Some neighborhood kid, as a joke, scraped off the *G*s.

Squinting against the wind and steeling herself for another encounter with the black girls, Kendry walks two blocks to the train station.

CHAPTER THREE

Losing Everything

Kendry takes her usual seat, pressing herself into the far corner of the train car. She props her book bag on her lap and hugs it to her chest like a breastplate. The train stutters, sighs, and then blasts forward, barreling out of Kensington Station. Two stops—past buildings, storefronts, and streets bubbling with traffic. During these two stops, a vinegary smelling man will enter and exit carrying a bag of fetid underwear. During these two stops, Kendry will shake her knees and suck in deep breaths and mumble, “Okay, okay, okay” to herself. During these two stops, Kendry will knead her knuckles and chew her bottom lip until she tastes the metal of her own blood. Two stops, and then Kendry must, once again, face the black girls.

The train whines and slows with its electronic yawn. Doors hiss open. “Avondale Station,” chimes the recorded voice. “Decatur will be your next stop.”

Stutter. Sigh. Blast.

A muddy-haired woman crunches a bag of Doritos. Assorted business men assure each other that, well, with the economy and all, “Redfield will surely have to concede.” A boy with a pouty mouth bobs to the beat in his headphones and says to Kendry, to the entire train, to no one in particular, “If you are what you say you are, a superstar, then have no fear, the camera’s here.” Kendry listens and doesn’t listen, looks and doesn’t look. She sweats and dries to dust and trembles like a wind-blown leaf.

Stutter. Stop. Hiss.

And there they are, glorious as a band of pirates, dark as a coven of witches—the black girls.

The black girls board the train laughing and bumping into each other. Their glee disturbs the hush of the car.

“Girl please,” one of them says.

“Go on somewhere,” says another.

An elderly black woman wearing a flaring hat slaps her purse down in her lap and sucks her teeth. The girls continue guffawing. Their merriment is both a performance and a challenge.

Kendry’s heart flutters and dives. She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and revels in the scent of the black girls, a scent that fills the car of the train. They exude a sweet, chemical odor, like bubble gum and acid, like flowers and iron. She watches the way they roll their eyes and purse their lips. “Sit your lazy butt down,” one says to the other. They chide each other; they egg each other on.

Kendry hugs her bag closer to her chest. Excitement pirouettes in her stomach. She decides she will say something to the black girls. She will introduce herself. She will tell them she thinks they are beautiful. She will drop to her knees, humble and devout as a cleric, and beg for their friendship. She will speak the magic words that will make them love her forever. Kendry looks up and then quickly down. *You guys are great*, she wants to say. *Black is beautiful*, she wants to shout, but she cannot will her mouth to speak.

Stutter. Stop. Hiss.

Though the thundering in her skull drowns out her thoughts, though she could not fathom even attempting to read, Kendry pulls out a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and props it on the mountain of her bag. Staring at the book will at least preempt her staring at the black girls. Still, she can hear it all, the crash and bang of the black girls’ conversation, like an action movie on full blast in an upstairs room. The black girls’ conversation sounds roguish and fantastic.

In snatches, she studies the black girls’ round hips and bowed legs. She admires their brown skin pulled tight over the high bones in their faces. To Kendry, the leader of

the group is the most beautiful. *Tandy* is her name. Kendry heard someone call her that last week.

Tandy props herself under the arm of a lank Puerto Rican boy and sucks a Blow Pop.

Stutter. Stop. Hiss.

A gaggle of morning commuters flood the train, blocking Kendry's view. She peeks through the crevices of satchels and briefcases and backsides. She voyeurs. She eavesdrops.

"Excuse me," Hat Woman says and then flap-flops her purse. She glares at Tandy's leg, which is spread across two seats.

"You excused," Tandy says.

"The *train* is crowded," Hat Woman says. "People *want* to sit."

"Well," Tandy says, "get up an' let them sit."

Hat Woman huffs and *tsks*. Her purse goes off again, flopping in her lap like a caught fish.

"Tandy," one of the other girls calls. "Yo, Tandy. Why you dissin' us, all up under that nigga like that?"

"Whatever," Tandy smacks her lollipop, then pokes out a poisonously red tongue. As she exits the train with the Puerto Rican boy, Tandy pinches her hands to her lips, imitating smoking a joint. "I got to go get my head straight."

"A'ight," one of the girls yells.

"Save me a splif," another chimes in.

"I got y'all," Tandy says. "You know I'm always looking out."

• • •

For days, Kendry replays the scene in her head. She even acts it out while her mother is away.

A'ight.

Save me a splif.

I'm always looking out.

In the bed, Kendry stares into the blank night, and whispers these words like a prayer. Each time she closes her eyes, an image of Tandy—glowing, smoky, ethereal—floats through her head like a premonition.

The black girls!

Kendry feels ravenous each time she listens to Tandy and the other girls talk about their boyfriends (He tried to trick me out like I was some silly little ninth grader), about their parents (You know you better get home 'cause your momma don't play all that), or their classes (Ten typed pages? By Wednesday! Mrs. Larsen is crazy). Kendry wants to belong to the black girls. She wants their brazenness, their sassiness, their self-involved insolence.

Kendry hates her anorexic life. She glazes through her classes at Crestman Prep, eats bologna sandwiches in the far corner of the dining hall, and then comes home to a mother who is either zonked out of her mind or curled over real estate files. Kendry spends weekends alone in her high, hollow room while Sami—Kendry's sole friend at Crestman—necks with Zach, Crestman's student body president. Kendry spends weekends playing solitaire and watching cartoons while Tandy and the other black girls smoke marijuana and sneak into clubs with fake IDs.

Kendry wants a life as hearty and remarkable as the lives of the black girls. Kendry wants to have a cheating boyfriend, who the stoutest of the black girls calls a “no-good ass nigga.” Kendry wants to smoke marijuana and be bold enough to announce it on a crowded train. Kendry wants the black girls' struggles, their tragedies, and their poverty and resilience. Kendry wants to stand among them and complain sassily about her mother. Most of all, Kendry wants to be their friend. Kendry wants to belong.

• • •

Two days after Tandy exited the train to get her head right, Doris sits Kendry down in the kitchen of their Buckhead loft. She tells Kendry the firm has fired her; she has had to sell everything, and, unfortunately, they will be moving. Kendry's face flushes with an anticipation that her mother mistakes for disappointment.

“I've already bought us a place,” Doris says as she grimaces with the bad news. It is as if she sees a vase teetering on a faraway, high shelf; it is as if Doris presages an

expensive and irrevocable disaster. “It’s in East Atlanta,” Doris bares her teeth and winces.

“East Atlanta?” Kendry’s heart jumps. Tandy and the other black girls live in East Atlanta.

“I’m sorry, hun.” Doris reaches to stroke Kendry’s hair, but Kendry bats her mother’s hand away. Doris’s bottom lip trembles, and Kendry wants to scream. Everything about her mother has become breakable. What happened to the woman who made the front page of the *Atlanta Journal*? What happened to the person they called “The House Hunter”?

“What school?” Kendry asks. She prays it is the same school as the black girls, though she is sure it won’t be.

“The houses are dirt cheap there,” her mother continues. “And huge.”

“Doris?” Kendry clenches her fists and shuts her eyes tight. “What school will I attend?”

“Your room is three times the size of—”

“Doris?” Kendry says.

Doris squeezes her hands together then places them before her on the counter. Doris’s once flaxen hair has gone wiry and brittle. Her skin is matte brown. Her eyes have yellowed along with her teeth. But Doris still has her hands, the only part of her that remains beautiful.

Kendry looks down at her mother’s hands with their porcelain skin and pianist fingers. She notices her mother’s rings are gone.

“We’re so deep in debt. I’ve already had to ask Madison to help with the house. We can’t afford the private schools, even if we—”

“Mother,” Kendry’s voice grows slow and stiff. She balls her fists and repeats, “What school?”

Doris sighs. Her answer is almost a whisper. “Paul Lawrence Dunbar.”

The name whooshes through Kendry’s head like a breeze.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

Paul Lawrence Dunbar. In East Atlanta.

Kendry recalls Tandy on the train. Her sweatshirt read *PLD*. Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

It is almost too much to handle. It is almost too good to be true, like the ending to a Nickelodeon movie where everyone, even the dumb bully jock, says yes to success. Kendry uncurls her fists. She feels smiled upon by the universe. East Atlanta. *PLD*. Finally, her prayers are answered. Finally, she will have a place to belong. Finally, she can become friends with the black girls.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bob and the Beatles

Ten days later, Doris and Kendry move into a sprawling, five-bedroom house with shellacked floors and large, glinting windows. On her first day of school, Kendry wakes up two hours early and paces the floor. Her stomach hops and jiggles. Her heart trembles in her chest.

A question, like a bubble in a bog, floats to the surface of her brain and then pops.

“What will I wear?”

Kendry first puts on distressed jeans and Doris’s faded Beatles tee-shirt, going for an “I-just-threw-this-on” look. But it seems wrong, contrived. It seems exactly what it is: a rich, white girl’s version of poverty. Of course, Kendry and Doris aren’t rich anymore. Not by a long shot. But still. Kendry tears off the pants, puts on stretched denim jeans, and changes the Beatles shirt for a fitted, long-sleeved tee with a smiling Bob Marley on the front. The knotted vines of Marley’s hair slide down her torso. This makes Kendry feel even whiter. Kendry thinks better of Bob and changes back into the Beatles shirt. But the Beatles don’t match the stretch jeans.

A tank top, Kendry thinks.

After rummaging through her clothes hamper, she finds her favorite—solid black with a pink lace hem. She slides into it.

Great.

But it is mid-January and forty degrees outside. She'll look like a complete idiot.

A sweater, then.

Kendry sorts through stacks of clothes. All her sweaters are either dark wools or pastel cashmeres. Definitely not right.

So. It's either Bob or the Beatles.

She goes back and forth between the two, trying on each shirt with her jacket and book bag, trying on each shirt as she walks to and from the full-length mirror. The strip of carpet between the bed and the closet serves as an imaginary school hallway. Kendry tries on the various shirts and practices introducing herself to Tandy and the other black girls.

She extends her hand to her Beatles-shirted self, "Hi, I'm—" No, not Hi. It sounds too pushy. Too excited and needy. Too much like someone named *Cathy*, with a *K*.

Kendry switches shirts.

"Hey, y'all," she says to her Bob Marley'ed self.

Hey y'all? What is she, a cowgirl?

She changes shirts again and tries a different greeting, "What's up, girlfriend?"

Even worse.

Kendry flops on the bed and razzles her hands through her hair. *Idiot*, she thinks. What has she gotten herself into? She should have insisted on Northside High. She should have made her mother drive her the twenty-seven miles every morning. But now, it is too late. Kendry will be the only white student at Paul Lawrence Dunbar—an all-black school in East Atlanta. Neither the Beatles nor Bob Marley can save her. Kendry is doomed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Black is Beautiful

Crestman, which was founded in 1892 by the Southern Women's Legion, is ranked as one of the top private schools in the country. Its buildings boast marble floors, mahogany paneling, and state-of-the art facilities. Students check e-mail at computer kiosks between classes. They eat in one of the three high-ceilinged dining halls. They study in the five-floor Conner Library.

As soon as Kendry enters Paul Lawrence Dunbar's drab, L-shaped building, she knows it will be no Crestman.

Principal Bellews, a banana-colored black man, walks Kendry to her homeroom on the second floor. PLD's walls are a dull green, nothing like the deep mahogany wood of Crestman's hallways. PLD's ceilings hang low and sag in some places, nothing like the high monogrammed ceilings of Crestman. The halls are mostly empty, except for an occasional straggling student. Kendry notices the dented and multicolored lockers. Some of the doors are open and expose textbooks so old the corners are rounded and gnawed.

Kendry enters her homeroom (Mrs. Larsen, room Two Two Three) and sits in the back corner. She is still unsure about her final decision: Bob Marley, jeans, and suede boots. She watches as other students file into the room. The boys rustle about in

their oversized jeans, multicolored jerseys, and matching caps tilted at slick angles. The girls stand in clumps, smacking and giggling, with their hands tucked into the back pockets of their pants.

Kendry sits stiffly. She is hyper aware of herself. Like a burglar caught between laser beams, she doesn't move for fear of setting off an invisible alarm. Instead of opening her back pack, instead of reaching down to tie her shoes or pull up her socks, instead of making any movement—movement that will surely send ten thousand vases tumbling from ten thousand shelves, movement that will surely cast condemning eyes on her—Kendry stares down into her lap, down into her hands.

As if for the first time, Kendry notices that her hands are nothing like her mother's. Kendry's hands look large and long, translucent as jellyfish. They are definitely nothing like the deep browns and rust-colored reds of her new classmates.

"Girl, please," a voice echoes in from the hallway. "I spent ten minutes on that assignment."

Kendry's insides twirl. She recognizes the voice. It's Tandy.

Proud as a bride, Tandy promenades across the threshold. She purses her lips and surveys the room, holding her notebooks limply in her arm. Her gum pops in her mouth like something on fire. Tandy is so gorgeously and so completely over it all—the whole classroom-books-school thing—that Kendry wants to melt.

Instinctively, Kendry tucks her hair behind her ears. Then, remembering the hideousness of her hands, their jellyfish lankiness, Kendry slides her hands under the desk. In her head, she rehearses her introduction. "Hey, what's up," she decided this morning.

Tandy says goodbye to the other girls, walks down the aisle, and slams her notebooks on the desk next to Kendry's. She sits down with a huff. She crosses her legs. She surveys the room once more. *Yuck*, her face says. *Whatever*. As if it were an afterthought, she leans back, cocks her head to the left, and then looks at Kendry.

Kendry's insides spin double-time. This morning, Kendry's well rehearsed, "Hey, what's up," seemed easy enough. But now, in the face of Tandy's sharp eyes and gloriously pouting lips, Kendry's preamble shrivels in her throat.

Kendry thinks perhaps Tandy will recognize her from the train. But Tandy doesn't.

"You new?" Tandy asks. "Ain't you?"

This is the moment Kendry has been waiting for, a chance to plead her case. But awe paralyzes her. It is as if she is standing before God, muted by his grace, with a single, fiery question banging against the cage of her soul.

Kendry chews the inside of her lip and wills her mouth to open.

"I'm Kendry," she says, extending her hand like a foreign diplomat.

"Excuse you," Tandy scoffs. "But what's wrong with this picture?"

Before Kendry can answer, Tandy says, "You're in *my* seat."

"Oh," Kendry says, withdrawing her hand. "Oh, I...." Kendry stands up to change seats and topples her pencil case in the process. "I'm...." stammers Kendry as she moves to gather her supplies. She drops on all fours and snatches up her gewgaws. "I'm sorry," she says to Tandy's pink sneakers. "I didn't know." Her highlighter rolls behind her and under the radiator. "The guy who brought me, the teacher," Kendry says, pricking her finger on her compass, "I mean, Principal Bellews, he didn't say where I should sit." Kendry grabs up a pink Kim Possible gel pen as it rolls toward the seat in front of her, and then reaches for the Wonder Woman eraser wedged under Tandy's right foot. She finds the base of her mechanical pen, which lay miles away from its stem. Lead filaments are strewn across the floor like debris from a plane crash.

"I'm really, really sorry," Kendry says. Her hair loosens from its scrunchie and strands fly into her mouth. Her voice quivers and melts, "I didn't know there were assigned seats."

Blood rushes to Kendry's ears. Her lips tremble. Her eyes water and sting. This is horrible. This is worse than anything she ever could have imagined. Kendry feels dizzy and nauseous. She feels idiotic and incompetent and blaringly white. At any moment, she will burst into tears.

"Just kidding, girl." Tandy says. She crouches now to help Kendry with the pencils. "That ain't my seat."

Now, Kendry's eyes water in relief.

“I’m Tandy.” This time, Tandy extends her hand toward Kendry. Kendry shakes Tandy’s hand.

“Mrs. Larsen’s going to be late,” Tandy says. “She’s always late on Mondays.”

“Thanks,” Kendry manages to reply and sucks the blood from the tip of her pricked finger. The dust on her finger crunches against her front teeth.

Tandy leans so close Kendry can see the part in her hair and the dark scalp gleaming from beneath. “You nervous,” Tandy observes.

“A little,” Kendry says. With her undamaged hand, she fumbles Kim Possible and Wonder Woman back into their case.

“It’s cool,” Tandy remarks and gives Kendry the pencils she has gathered. “I got your back as long as you don’t say anything stupid or try to play me and my girls.”

Kendry’s mouth parts in a smile. She can hardly believe her luck. Her first day at PLD and she is talking to *Tandy*, the friend of her dreams. The first hour of the first day and her dream friend has *got her back*. Kendry feels excited and ambushed, like a one millionth customer greeted with confetti and horns. If she can make it through homeroom without tripping or farting or saying anything corny, she stands a chance at being Tandy’s friend forever.

“I was new here last year. So, you know....” Tandy says. “Just two pieces of advice. One, don’t sit on the toilet after Kemah. She’s the fat one,” Tandy says. “Over there.” Kendry spots the girl three rows over. “Heard she got crabs.”

“Okay,” Kendry says.

“Two, watch out for Maurice Maitland.” Tandy points to a tall, beige boy leaning against a window ledge. He waggles his tongue and winks. “He can’t control himself around redbones.”

Kendry agrees to watch out for Maurice Maitland, though she does not know exactly what Tandy means. She is too giddy to think straight. And the word *redbones* throws Kendry off. Does redbone mean confused? Does it mean clumsy? Or is redbone a slang term, like *neo* or *frosh*, for new students? Kendry smiles wide at Tandy. Tandy smiles in return. Whatever it is, *redbone* is not an insult. Kendry can tell this much.

“You probably hate folks asking,” Tandy says, “but which one?”

Kendry's finger no longer bleeds, but she continues to suck it. The nervousness of a pop quiz wriggles in her stomach. She doesn't know how to answer Tandy's question. Tandy leans in close, ready to enter into cahoots, ready to lock pinkies and become play sisters. Kendry knows secrets are one way friendship begins. She learned that from Sami. She has something, some piece of information that Tandy wants—the secret code. The cipher, Kendry knows, has to do with Tandy thinking she is redbone. Kendry will gladly hand it over if she can figure out what *it* is.

Kendry sighs and shrugs her shoulders. “Hmmm,” she says. Then she shakes her finger. “Ouch.” Kendry is adlibbing. She is bluffing. She prays to God this will be enough.

“Your father?” Tandy asks. “Is *he* the black one?”

Oh,” Kendry says. “That?” She deciphers the code. *Redbone*. The black *one*. Tandy thinks she is biracial. Kendry's face grimaces as she watches the same bad-news vase her mother saw days before. Only now, the vase does not simply teeter. Now, it leans tragically toward a crash.

Kendry forces a smile. “No,” she says, and then she stops just short of the truth. “My father left when I was three,” which is true. Kendry says nothing about Doris, her Minnesota-bred, white-as-salt mother. She won't tell Tandy the whole truth. Not just yet. Kendry will revel, for a few moments, in her newfound belonging.

One word, *redbone*, and Kendry notices the olive tone of her skin, its muted brownness. And her hair, a mass of stormy locks, no longer seems so different from Tandy's or the other girls. But biracial? This is a stretch to her, though obviously she could be. Kendry remembers Lydia Grant from her old school who was biracial.

Everyone had thought Lydia was the prettiest freshmen girl. Her creamy face, with its pink lips and gray eyes, was crowned with a poof of brown hair. In the span of three months, Lydia made second captain of the cheerleading squad, queen of the Mini Peach Bowl, and assistant editor of the school paper. By second semester, Lydia was a shoe-in for homecoming court.

But when Lydia's parents visited—a slim Swedish woman and an angular man from Nigeria—a buzz ran through the school. Lydia Grant was biracial. Kendry

remembers being aghast, not by the fact of Lydia's white mother and black father, which was common enough, but by her lack of disclosure. Instantly, all the things that made Lydia beautiful—her green eyes, her curly hair, and her perfectly tanned skin—became faux, ersatz. A hoax.

"I knew it," Samantha Klieg, second runner-up to Lydia for Miss Mini Peach bowl said as she glossed on lipstick in the girls bathroom. "I knew that little slut was up to something." Kendry remembers thinking the same thing, thinking Lydia Grant had cheated.

Of course Kendry will have to tell Tandy she is not biracial. But how should she say it? To say, "I'm not black," will sound racist, as if she is denying something, as if she is taking offense. If, on the other hand, Kendry says, "I'm white," then what would that be? A social suicide? A boast? No matter how she chooses to say it, Kendry knows she has to correct Tandy.

"I'm sorry for asking," Tandy says, "and on your first day, too. I'm so nosy."

"That's okay," Kendry says.

"Somebody in your family's black," Tandy says. "I mean, with a name like *Kendra*."

"Actually, it's—"

"And look at your hair," Tandy continues, "And those lips. White folks don't have lips like that."

Kendry only smiles and sucks her finger. Tandy takes her silence for agreement.

"I'm good though," Tandy says. "I told Celesta and Keeshawn you wasn't white." Then, pointing at the top of Kendry's head, Tandy yells across the room. "Celesta. Keeshawn. I told y'all. Y'all owe me five dollars."

A stout, wide-faced girl responds from the other side of the classroom. "She ain't white?" Kendry recognizes her as one of the black girls from the train. She must be Celesta. Somehow the name seems to fit.

"For real?" Says the girl besides Celesta—Keeshawn, it must be.

"Yep." Tandy smiles proudly. "She ain't white."

A voice booms over the others. "Who ain't white?" Maurice Maitland asks.

Kendry's hands tremble. She hides them under her desk. Celesta and Keeshawn walk from one side of the room, and Maurice walks from the other.

"Nobody, fool," Tandy says to Maurice. "Mind your own business."

"You sure you're not white?" Maurice asks Kendry. Hot eyes land on Kendry. The room seems to contract, to close in. Kendry hears the accusation in Maurice's question. Again she is ambushed, the millionth customer, instantly famous, bombarded by cameras, microphones jabbing at her face. Now, they want pictures and footage. Now, they want a speech. Kendry looks from Maurice to Tandy. Her heart cringes in her chest. No words form in her mouth.

Tandy sucks her teeth. "Why you got to blow her spot like that?"

"I'm just trying to get the info on the neo."

"Didn't I just say she is mixed?"

"No," Maurice says.

"Well, she is." Tandy says. "What white folks you know would send their kids to PLD?"

"You right," Maurice concedes.

"White folks don't just roll up in East Atlanta like that," Tandy says.

"Unless they trying to arrest somebody," Keeshawn says.

"Or get some black thang thang," Maurice says. He and Celesta slap hands.

"Yep," Keeshawn says, "or buy up our houses and kick us to the curb."

"Girl," Celesta says, "that gentrification is a mother. Soon East Atlanta will be whiter than Buckhead."

"They only come here cause it's cheap," Maurice says.

"Everything's cheaper when you're white," Celesta says. "Cheaper than being black."

"We can't complain," Tandy says. "We let them do it. We let them buy up our property."

"Got that right," Keeshawn says.

Immediately, Kendry's room rolls out before her, dazzling and humongous and sickeningly pink. Her four-poster bed sits in the middle of it all like the lounge of some slave missus.

"Ain't that the truth," Celesta says. "White folks want everything that's ours. First Eminem takes rap, then Justin Timber-fake kills R&B. Now Mariah Carey's claiming black."

"Actually, she says she's biracial," Tandy says. "And that's not the same thing. I mean," she looks to Kendry apologetically, "it is but...."

"But it isn't," Maurice says. "It's different with Mariah 'cause she wasn't trying to claim that before. Now she's a nigga through and through."

"Nah," Celesta says. "She ain't no nigga. She's a wigger. Just like Justin and Elvis and all the other singers who've been biting black folk's rhymes for years."

"Wiggers, wiggers here and there," Maurice says.

"Wiggers, wiggers everywhere," Celesta finishes. She and Maurice slap five again.

Wigger.

Unlike *redbone*, Kendry needs no help deciphering the meaning of this word.

Kendry cannot decide how to compose her face. She feels as if she has swallowed an anchor. She feels as if she has run over a dog. It is her mother, Kendry knows, who has sent her white child to PLD. It is her mother who is rolling up in East Atlanta *buying up houses*.

"So, Red," Maurice stands at the side of Kendry's desk. He crouches down, so that their faces meet, and smiles like an evil cat.

"Hi," Kendry says. Her voice comes like the last buzz of a fly about to be smashed.

"Leave her alone, Maurice," says a dark, thin girl seated behind Tandy. Her voice is wiry, frail as straw. Her eyes burn a bright amber-brown—a photograph in negative, a blind person's eyes—against her skin.

"Shut up, blacky."

"Look who's talking," the girl says.

“Niggas can’t mind their own business,” Maurice says. “Coffee-dipped ass. Looking like half-past midnight.”

The students around Maurice snicker. The girl with the wiry voice folds her arms and slinks in her chair. Her bottom lip trembles. Kendry feels as if she should stand up for the girl and say something cutting to Maurice. But she can tell by the glint in his eyes that no matter what she says, he will be sure to have the last word.

“What’s up?” Maurice turns his attention back to Kendry. He licks his lips and pats Kendry’s thigh. “Are you going to let me hit that? Give Maitland some of that yellow spla-dow?”

Tandy pulls Maurice away by the collar of his shirt. “Go to the office and find out about Mrs. Larsen,” she says.

To Kendry’s surprise, Maurice obeys.

I should tell them, Kendry thinks. I should tell them now. I should tell them that my mother’s white, that my whole family is white. I should tell them that I’m not biracial.

“Don’t mind him, Meeka,” Tandy says to the wiry girl.

“Don’t you just hate ignorant niggas?” Keeshawn says.

Kendry knows she cannot answer this question, which is not a question at all. She can’t sit here and participate.

“Stupid ass nigga,” Celesta says.

Kendry smiles with closed lips. She tries not to betray the fact that her brain is swelling under her skull. How—exactly—did she get here? One minute she is trying on shirts at home, and the next minute she is pretending to be biracial. Her stomach heats up like a furnace.

Kendry has to say something now before things get out of hand. But her desire to belong overwhelms her desire to tell the truth.

Tandy glances at her watch. “Mrs. Larsen needs to come on. We’re going to the High Museum.” Under her breath, she says to Kendry, “I’m excited about the trip. You ever been?”

Another pop quiz. The question feels like an accusation.

“No,” Kendry says quickly and loud. *No* is the only thing she can think to say. Kendry has gone with her mother to nearly every opening last year, but she thinks *no* is the right answer. “Who goes to museums?” Kendry adds for emphasis. As a new black girl, Kendry has to display the appropriate tastes. Surely, she thinks, black girls don’t like museums.

“Tandy goes to museums,” Meeka sings.

“Yeah,” Keeshawn says. “She likes boring stuff like that.”

“Discovery Channel. *Crocodile Hunter*.” Celesta nudges Tandy, “Ain’t that your show, girl?”

“*Crocodile Hunter*?” Kendry chuckles her surprise.

Tandy opens her notebook and shuffles papers around. “Darn,” she says to no one in particular. “Mrs. Larsen needs to come on.”

“She’ll come,” Kendry offers, realizing too late how ridiculous she sounds. *She’ll come?* It’s Kendry’s first day at school. What does Kendry know about Mrs. Larsen coming or not coming?

“Whatever,” Tandy says, retreating to the business of her notebooks. She reads the headings of her folders and papers aloud, but just under her breath—biology, compound complex, sci-finds, trig two, mid-year eval, tip sheet one, two, quiz bowl facts. She pulls the papers from her notebook, snatching them up to a pile held against her chest. She looks at Kendry and shakes her head as she repeats, “Whatever.”

Meeka, still throbbing from Maurice’s insult, lays her head across her desk and flips through a novel. Keeshawn and Celesta fall into their own conversation about last night’s math assignment. Kendry is left to swelter between laser beams.

Distress rises under Kendry’s skin. Her ears warm and prickle. She can see it now—the fuel of her mother’s frown. It is the vase, the bad news vase, whirling and whirring, spinning on the lip of its base. The vase teeter-tottering on the ledge, over the edge, soaring to a hideous crash. Kendry sees herself shrinking in Tandy’s eyes. She sees herself as Tandy must see her now: a pale girl with frizzy hair and gawky hands, a girl who lives in a neighborhood where houses are being bought up by white folks, a girl who Maurice Maitland wants to bang, and probably will.

“You were almost right,” Kendry says. Her mouth goes cottony as she prepares to offer this, her last thing, to Tandy. Even as she fashions the words—in her head, on her tongue—Kendry knows it is a stupid thing to say. Dangerous, too. But she will deal with the danger if and when it manifests. For now, this is the only thing she can think of; this is the only thing she has left to give.

“You were so close,” Kendry says.

She falls to her knees, devout, chaste, unworthy. She looks up at the altar—cloaked and sacrificial as a monk—with the blade poised over her own throat.

“My mom,” Kendry says.

Tandy pauses her shuffling, stops mid-step, “What?”

“My mom,” Kendry smiles. “She’s the black one.”

THE END OF EXCERPT

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