

CHAPTER TWELVE

Thanks to an excellent GPA, killer personal essays, and a 1360 combined SAT score, I got into all five colleges I applied to, including my first choice - Howard University in Washington, D.C. I was accepted into their Honors Program and was thrilled. I dreamed of attending Howard since I first entered high school. I wanted the Historically Black College and University experience. I envisioned myself attending classes in our nation's capital, visiting the Library of Congress and all the Smithsonian museums, graduating with an English degree, and beginning my career as a writer and journalist. I would go to graduate school, later returning to Howard triumphantly to teach. I thought about the insightful, thought-provoking books I wanted to write about race, sex, class, and economics in American society, leading to a distinguished career as a college professor and lecturer. My words would inspire all, from world leaders to the man on the street. I fantasized about what I was destined to be, and it would all begin on the yard at Howard University. The Mecca. My dad didn't like the idea of me attending an HBCU at all. He envisioned Ivy League schools for me, or at least private white institutions. I quickly ruled those out and let him know I wasn't interested in those kinds of schools. I made two small concessions to him by applying to Princeton and Towson State University, though I assured him I would not go to either if I was accepted. I wanted an HBCU, and I wanted Howard. Applying to other schools was a waste of time as far as I was concerned.

My acceptance letter and financial aid package also included a letter from my "Howard Buddy." As part of the Honors Program, Howard's Office of Student Life set you up with an upperclassman "buddy" to communicate with over the summer before you came to campus. This "buddy" would sit with you through Freshmen Orientation and take you on a tour of the campus and the city. My Howard Buddy letter was from a junior named Vanessa, also an English major. She was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority. I immediately wrote Vanessa back, telling her how excited I was to be attending Howard, and how I was really looking forward to meeting her and starting classes. We corresponded back and forth for a few weeks. Vanessa told me about her plans to go to law school and become a civil-rights attorney and about her summer job in D.C. at a prestigious law firm. I told her about my plans to become a prolific writer and lecturer.

When I got Howard's acceptance letter, my dad said all the right things initially about being proud of me. He continued to say those things right up until I started corresponding with Vanessa. He was always asking about our correspondence, and I believe seeing me write and receive those letters weekly made my plans to go to Howard a reality for him. As a result, he stopped saying all those right things. He became even more fiercely opposed to me attending Howard University. Now my dad really wanted me to attend a white school close to home. My dad began asking me questions like, "Are you sure you're ready to live on your own?" Or, "Aren't you worried about being on campus by yourself?" Or, "You know, once you go away to school, Mommy and Daddy won't be there to help you. You won't be able to come home all the time." That last point was the one he harped on most frequently when he started his anti-Howard campaign. He spoke as if going to Howard would require cutting off all contact with my family, as if I would just be floating adrift on the sea of life. As far as the distance went, Howard was a bit more than an hour away by train. I could come home every weekend if I wanted. Truthfully, I could come home *daily*. I was appalled at his attitude. I ran down a list of Howard alumni to my dad who were extremely successful in their careers and in their lives. But my dad continued with, "Petula, it's a Black school! How can you be sure it will really challenge you? Even if you don't think you want to go to the Ivy League, you might be better off at some other school, one with

fewer Black people. One closer to us.” My dad said after being around Black people all my life, I had little to show for it other than hurt feelings. He reminded me of all the incidents of bullying and abuse I’d endured. And as always, he reminded me going to a white school would give me the chance to show white people I was equal to them, and then the world would open for me. “All this trouble to attend a school that isn’t really going to prepare you for the world you want to be a part of,” he said. “The world isn’t just Black you know.” Then he’d go back to the distance diatribe, saying I needed to stay close to home, making it sound like I needed a passport to get to D.C. For the first time in my life I was completely ignoring my dad’s edicts, and now he needed to keep me close, so he could keep me under his influence. And of course, he genuinely couldn’t imagine a Black institution of higher learning could be better for me.

Ultimately my dad weakened my belief in myself. I was a seventeen-year-old young woman who still believed my dad would only want what was best for me. So, whatever he wanted for me was what I should have. I couldn’t block my father totally out of my head, though I should have, and as a result, my dad was able to successfully sow seeds of doubt in me. My mother never said anything to me about going away to school, what school I should choose, or anything else. She said nothing about the things my dad was saying to me, and she offered no support regarding my decision. When I asked her what she thought about me going to Howard, she would only say, “I just think your father knows best honey.” As usual, she was standing in solidarity with her husband, which for me meant both my parents opposed my desire to go to Howard. Neither had any faith in me and my plans for my life. I wasn’t sure enough or strong enough to move forward with my plans and dreams without them. I couldn’t bring myself to fight for my dreams if I had to fight them both. By the end of July, I wrote Vanessa to tell her I wasn’t going to be joining her, and by the end of August, I found myself in a dorm room at Towson State University, my fifth-choice school. Just like my dad wanted, it was the white school closest to my house. I didn’t even need to live in the dorm to attend, because the local number eight bus ran right past campus. I could have easily commuted from my parents’ house. But I was determined to not to live at home, so I moved into the dorms at Towson. I even qualified for an “Other Race” grant when I shifted all my financial aid information to Towson. One of my greatest regrets in life has been not attending Howard University. But my dad was pleased, telling me it was “better to stay close to home right now, because you know you aren’t ready to live on your own. And to think you got into a white school.” My mother smiled at my dad as he said it, just as pleased as him.

I hated Towson State University. I thought about Howard constantly. I regretted my decision mightily. I took four classes and struggled in all of them. All my professors kept me at an awkward distance, unwilling to fully answer my questions when I asked them in class. I wasn’t accustomed to having bad relationships with my teachers, so their lack of enthusiasm for my desire to interact with them was quite off-putting. I was an English major, and my English professor hated me the most. I knew we were off on the wrong foot when I cited Toni Morrison as one of my favorite writers and Maya Angelou as my favorite poet. My professor looked at me like I had three heads. She gave me failing grades all on my papers, which was baffling. I always did well in school, and I certainly always excelled in English, especially writing. There were never any notes on my papers, just a disgustingly low grade in red ink, with no other commentary or explanation. When I tried to discuss my low grades, the conversation never went anywhere. I tried to get a sense of what she wanted from me, but her only feedback was, “Well, you always seem to have interesting things to say.” She sent me to the university’s Writing Lab, claiming my writing needed improvements requiring intense tutoring. Appalled and ashamed, I

went to the Writing Lab to get help with one of the few things I counted on in my life – my writing ability.

At the Writing Lab, I sat down with one of the proctors, a senior named Helen. She was an Education major. She looked over my professor's referral to the Lab. "Your professor didn't say what you needed to work on," she commented. I shrugged my shoulders, saying "That makes three of us." Helen decided to give me a few tests to determine my general skill and competency. After I got my results, she and I would talk again, and I would be assigned a tutor. Just hearing the word "tutor" made me angry, but I looked at her and nodded. Over the next two hours, I took a bunch of assessments evaluating my written grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, writing composition, and sentence structure. I diagrammed sentences, something I hadn't done since elementary school. I also wrote a 250-word essay, and I completed an analogy quiz. Helen asked me if I wanted to wait for my results – there was no one else in the lab and if I didn't mind hanging around another hour we could make my "improvement plan" immediately. I agreed. Once my results came back, Helen apologized to me for assuming I needed a tutor. Then she asked me when I would be available to start tutoring students. She said they normally were prohibited from having freshmen students as tutors in the Writing Lab, but they were quite short-staffed, so she was willing to make an exception for me. Helen even said she would have to thank my professor for sending me over as a potential tutor, and said I could get credit for my work in the Lab. I stopped Helen, explaining to her my professor sent me there to get help with my writing. Helen laughed and said, "You must have misunderstood."

I got up and left the Writing Lab. I never returned to my English class.

The bright spot of attending Towson was my roommate. Her name was Kristina. She was a white girl from central New Jersey. She was also an English major, and we quickly became best friends. We shared each other's clothes and makeup and snacks. We read each other's writing, and even she couldn't explain why my English professor didn't like my work. "I wish I wrote half as well as you do Petula," she'd say. She gave me pep talks when I returned from my classes, feeling defeated. We would go to the library, the student union, and the local haunts where Towson students hung out. She had lots of friends on campus, all of them white, and her friends became acquaintances of mine. I never befriended any of the Black students at Towson. A few months into our friendship, I found out she thought I was white. This bit of information revealed itself when she met my boyfriend at the time, who was a Black guy. My Black boyfriend and I went with her and the white guy she was seeing to a pizzeria right outside campus one Saturday afternoon. Things went well as we laughed together, ate jumbo slices and guzzled Pepsi-Colas. It was one of the few times I felt at ease and at home at Towson. But when Kristina and I returned to our dorm room and the boys left, she immediately asked me if my parents were freaking out because I was dating a Black guy. I said, "No. Why would they be?"

Kristina responded with, "Well, my parents are pretty open minded, but if I dated a Black guy, they would lose it!" I responded with a laugh, saying, "Well, I am sure they would, but what does that have to do with me and my parents?" Before I realized where our disconnection was, we did this twisted verbal two step for a few minutes. I found myself in the awkward position of explaining to her my parents weren't freaking out about me dating a Black guy because I was Black too. Kristina was silent for several minutes. "Wow," she finally managed to say. "So, you're Black? As in...both your parents are Black? Both are totally Black? No white people anywhere?"

When I said "no," she started yelling at me. "What's wrong with you?" she said. "How could you not tell me? You intentionally deceived me!" She immediately stopped speaking to

me, stopped sharing her writing with me, and stopped sharing her clothes and makeup with me, too, saying, “I can’t believe a Black girl wears the same color foundation as me!” And when she snatched her friendship away from me, her friends followed suit. They, too, were angry with what they interpreted as my deception. I thought they were all idiots for not realizing I was Black. Now I was truly alone at Towson.

It was the final straw for me. I could not continue to be a student at Towson State University. I packed up all my things to go home for Thanksgiving break. I decided not to return to school after break was over, but I didn’t tell anyone at the time. I just couldn’t do it. Everything I thought I knew about myself, from knowing I was a smart girl to knowing I was an excellent writer to knowing I was Black, was tampered with. I hated being surrounded by all these white people. I wanted to go home, to be around familiar things and familiar people. I just wanted to have peace.

When I went away to college, my dad came out of retirement and took a part-time job. My dad was almost seventy years old by this time, but he insisted. He wanted to go back to work. He claimed the money he earned was going to help me with my school expenses. He took a job at a luxury high-rise apartment complex in the Mount Vernon area of Baltimore, not too far from downtown. The building was one of those types of places with a gorgeously appointed lobby and amenities like a doorman, a valet to park your car in the attached parking garage, and a concierge desk. My dad said he worked the concierge desk making calls, signing for deliveries, and such. Whenever I talked to my dad on the phone, he spoke of the well-to-do white people who lived there, how much they liked him, and how they often gave him large cash tips or expensive gifts. He said he was meeting many influential people there too, people who were going to help him with a big project he was planning. I never asked about the details of the project, and I pretty much ignored what he said about working there until my mom began to tell me a different story. My mom said my dad was acting strangely since he started working there. He wasn't sleeping at night. Instead he was up all night pacing the floor, sometimes leaving their bedroom and going downstairs to scribble in a notebook he would never let her see. He started working longer hours at the high rise and started talking about a man who lived there who was going to help him "make a move" benefitting the whole family. She said he wasn't eating much and was snapping at her quite often. That last bit of news was the greatest shock of all, because my dad had always been a mild-mannered man, who I'd never heard raise his voice to my mom. I asked my mom if she considered taking dad to the doctor or if there was anything I could do. I offered to come back home (looking for any excuse to leave school), but she said it wasn't necessary. I never told her how badly things were going for me at school, but I did tell her I was going to come home early for Thanksgiving. I was going to be home the Tuesday morning before the holiday. Once I got home, I planned to tell them I wasn't going back to Towson State.

Travelling from my dorm room to my house took all of twenty-two minutes by car, but I felt like I'd journeyed millions of miles to return home. I was deliriously happy to be there. My friends were home from their respective colleges too, and I made tons of phone calls to reconnect with them all. I suggested we get together at the Poly-City football game on Thanksgiving Day. The Poly-City game is the oldest high-school football rivalry in the country, (more than a century old), pitting Baltimore Polytechnic Institute against Baltimore City College. Or Baltimore City College against Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, depending on who you asked. The game was played in the stadium where the Baltimore Orioles played, which made it a very big deal. Alumni from both schools, as well as young people and adults from all over the city, attended the game on Thanksgiving. It wasn't just a football game, it was a social event of vital importance to the fabric of Baltimore. It was also an opportunity for recent high-school graduates who had gone away to college to get together and see each other, which was what I was most looking forward to.

Shivering with my friends at the game was awesome; I was back to being myself. I went home afterward to bask in the smells of my mom's cooking, lying on the living-room couch. My boyfriend (not an ink spot) and his two best friends came over to join us for Thanksgiving dinner, and we gorged ourselves on turkey, ham, potato salad, string beans, rolls, sweet potato pie, and holiday wine. Laughter and warmth circled the table as we ate and talked, and I was totally happy and contented. Things were going well, and my dad's behavior seemed normal. But at dinner he mentioned one of his friends at the apartment complex was going to help him with a real-estate deal, and my ears perked up. I asked my dad what he was talking about, and he

shushed me saying, "I'll talk to you about it later, when your mother isn't around. Maybe you can explain to her what a fantastic opportunity it is. You'll understand it because you're smart. As much as I love your mother, you know she's not the smartest person in the world." My boyfriend and his friends left, and I went to my room to take my post-Thanksgiving dinner nap. I needed to prepare myself for the next round of activities, which meant going out with my girlfriends to Odell's. Odell's was one of the most popular nightclubs in the city, and they held a huge party on Thanksgiving night every year. I called my best friend Linda to confirm our plans to go later, and I went up to my old bedroom to stretch across my bed. The turkey and stuffing took me to dreamland for a few hours.

While I was sleeping, I started to dream about loud voices. I couldn't make out what the voices were saying, but they were angry, familiar voices. The voices got louder and louder, so loud, in fact, they woke me up. It was then I discovered I wasn't dreaming. The loud voices were coming from my parents' bedroom down the hall. They were so loud I could hear the yelling through their closed bedroom door. This was totally unprecedented. I never heard my parents argue in my entire life. They just didn't yell. They didn't yell at me, and they didn't yell at each other. Raised voices just didn't happen in my home. I lay there, listening intently, trying to make out what they were saying. I was too weighed down by my dinner to get up and listen at their bedroom door or go in and interrupt whatever was going on, so I crawled to the end of my bed to listen. My dad was asking a question about the deed to the house. My mom was asking why he needed it. He said something about needing it for his deal with the guy at his job. She continued to ask him why he needed the deed. She reminded him that she only owned half the house. Her brother owned the other half. Their voices got louder and more intense. My dad told my mom he needed the deed right now and didn't have time for her games. I heard her say something about how his name wasn't on the deed, so there wasn't anything he could do, and she wasn't going to let him do anything to endanger the house. He replied by saying something about getting paperwork from his friend at his job, so she could sign the house over to him. My mom said she would never do such a thing, and would never let her brother do it, and their voices got still louder. My dad began cursing at my mom. Now, I had to intervene. I struggled to get up, but I managed it, and I began walking as fast as I could towards their bedroom door. Just as I got to the door, it popped open. My dad stood in the doorway. "What do you want," he said to me rather brusquely. I looked past him into the bedroom at my mother. She was sitting on the edge of the bed. She looked sad and scared. "What's going on dad," I asked.

"Nothing," he responded. "Your mother and I were just talking."

"You weren't talking, you were *yelling*." I was starting to get upset myself. "What's going on?" I pushed past him and went over to my mom. There were tears in her eyes. "Mom, are you okay? What's going on?" My mom looked up at me and said, "You're still here? I am surprised you didn't leave yet. Aren't you and Linda going out tonight?"

I looked at the clock in their room and realized it was getting late. I looked at them both for a long moment, trying to decide what to do. I left their bedroom and went back to my room to get dressed to go out for the night. An hour later I was with my crew at Linda's house, preparing to go to Odell's, laughing and joking and drinking and playing music. But my parents' fight was on my mind. It worried me. A lot. It wouldn't leave my thoughts. Even as I was hanging out with my girls having a wonderful time, the sounds of their voices and the looks on their faces wouldn't leave my mind. After a while, we all got into Linda's car, and we started heading down to Odell's, which took us back past my parents' house. As we approached my parents' block, I said to Linda, "Let me out of the car, girl. I need to go check on something. I'll get a cab down to

the club and catch up with y'all down there later." I wasn't sure why I went back to the house. Something in the pit of my stomach told me to. I walked up my porch steps, taking my house keys out of my jacket pocket. I unlocked the front door and entered the house. As soon as I shut the door, I heard a strange noise coming from upstairs. I couldn't quite figure out what the sound was, but then I heard my mother cry out, "*Help! Somebody! Help me!*"

I dashed up the stairs two at the time. The sound was coming from the bathroom. I opened the bathroom door to find my dad's hands around my mom's throat. My mom was bent over the bathtub and he was yelling something at her. I ran over and grabbed my father's arms, squeezing them to force him to let go of her throat. When he did, my mom scurried away, and I heard her running down the stairs. My dad turned towards me. I pushed him down hard to the floor, which he hit with a loud thud. I was bracing for him to jump up and hit me, but my dad was an elderly man, and I was a young, strong, and healthy girl. I took him down to the floor easily. Enraged, I balled up my fist and hit my dad squarely in the eye. He stayed there for a minute or two, motionless. "Mom, call the police," I yelled downstairs. She came back upstairs with the cordless telephone. When she saw her husband on the floor, she yelled at me, saying, "What have you done to your father?"

I ran downstairs past my mom and dialed 911. I quickly told the dispatcher I needed the police and gave her my address. When she asked what was the "nature of the call was," I said the magic words "domestic dispute," and in less time it takes to recount the incident, four police cars showed up and eight police officers entered my parents' small row house in East Baltimore.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I hated calling the police. I was afraid of what they might do to my dad, to my mom, to me. By the time they got there my dad was downstairs in the living room. He was sitting on the couch when the police entered the house. A few of the officers took my mother and me off to the side to ask what happened, while a few other officers talked to my dad. Four of the officers were white, and four were Black. The lead police officer was a gray-haired white man who appeared to be in his late fifties. As the officers talked to me and my mother, I tried to listen to what the other group of officers were saying to my dad. When the lead officer talked to my dad, my dad reverted to his deferential self. It was the way he always spoke and acted when white people were around – dulcet tones immediately found their way into his voice, and he became the picture of good manners. I heard the officer ask my dad what happened, and my dad responded quite calmly, “There’s no problem officer.” I wandered over to my dad. The lead officer turned to me and asked if I was the one who made the call. I looked at my father, and saw his eyes turn dark and cloudy. I explained my mom and dad were fighting when I called. The officer turned back to my dad and asked, “Is that true sir?” My dad said, “It wasn’t anything serious officer.”

My dad and the officer continued to talk, and after a minute or two the lead officer called one of the other officers over. They asked my dad if they could look into his eyes. My dad agreed, and the second policeman passed the lead officer a small flashlight. He shined it into my dad’s left eye for a moment, and then the right. He then reversed the process, shining the light into his right eye, then the left. The officer continued to talk to my dad, asking him again what happened. I went back over to my mom and the other group of policemen. After a few minutes of small group discussions, the officer in charge came over to my mother and me. He said my mom could press charges against my dad for assault if she wanted, but he also said more. He said he was concerned something else was going on with my dad. If my dad would agree to go with them peacefully and without incident, they would prefer to take my dad to the emergency room at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The officer had some concerns after talking to my dad based on how he was behaving and responding to his questions, and while he wasn’t a doctor, he believed “a medical response might be the best way to handle this situation.” My mom was visibly shaken. I was, too. I thought back to his behavior earlier in the evening, and to what my mother told me about his actions over the past few weeks. I turned to her and said, “Well mom? What do you think? It wouldn’t hurt to get dad looked at.” I turned back to the officer and asked, “If my mom does decide she wants to press charges later, are you sure she would be able to?”

The policeman assured us she would. He gave my mother his card and wrote down his direct line number along with the days and times he would be at the precinct. He told my mom if she contacted him during those times specifically, he would be able to help her personally. But she could also come to the station at any time to file a complaint. He was going to complete a report to give my mom, and he instructed her to bring with her if she decided to press charges. While the three of us talked, a few of the other policemen went over to my dad to talk to him. One of the officers noticed one of the paintings on the living room wall; it was the one of the cowboy with the injured calf slung over his saddle. I remembered it well from my childhood in New Jersey, and I looked up at the picture, thinking briefly back to those less tumultuous days. The officer asked who the artist was, and my dad proudly said he painted it. The officer complimented my dad, who began talking about how he painted all his life, how all the artwork on the walls of the house was his original work, and so on. The lead police officer came back

over to my dad and said, “You painted all these? Really? I paint a little in my spare time, but nothing this good.”

My dad asked what medium the officer used, and he responded, “I mostly do oil and watercolor. Hey, could we look at some of your other stuff?” My dad happily agreed, so he and most of the other policemen moved into the dining room to look at more of my dad’s artwork. Two police officers stayed in the living room with me and my mother, asking additional questions as they made out their report. The police officers in the dining room with my dad began talking about art, painting, and famous artists. This pleased my dad, and they began a rousing discussion about da Vinci versus Michelangelo. A few of the other officers jumped in, adding comments about their favorite painters. Someone even mentioned the painting on *Good Times* by Ernie Barnes. It was like I got all these Renaissance policemen to respond to my 911 call. Then they all headed into the den to look at more of my dad’s paintings. I joined the larger group looking at my dad’s artwork, fascinated at how calm my dad was now. He was smiling and laughing with the officers, enjoying their company from all outward appearances. His eyes danced as they all told him how talented he was. After a few minutes spent gushing over my dad’s paintings, the officer in charge brought the conversation back to the matter at hand. He said to my father, “Sir, I’m not sure what happened between you and your wife here tonight, but we think you should go see a doctor. Now. We want to take you to the hospital to get you checked out, to see what’s going on.”

I saw my dad’s eyes start to shift nervously in his head, and the officer must have seen him too, because he continued with a firmer tone. “Now, I’m not saying anything is wrong, but we don’t think whatever you did here tonight is something the police should deal with. Not right now anyway. If you’ll agree to go along with us peacefully, we can take you down to Johns Hopkins emergency room, and we’ll have some doctors look at you to see if something’s going on with you to make you act this way. We can call an ambulance for you, or I can drive you down in my patrol car myself. The other officers here can bring your daughter and wife down too if they want to come.” My dad’s face got flushed. I was worried he was going to snap again, right there, right in front of all those police officers and all their guns in the dining room. But he didn’t. He leaned into the lead officer and said, “I have more paintings on the walls in the hallway leading upstairs. Would you like to see them?” The officer responded with, “I’ll make you a deal. I’ll look at all your paintings if you’ll let us take you over to Hopkins when we’re done.” The officer glanced over at me. “I know your daughter is so worried about you. She looks worried.”

My dad looked over at me too. “My daughter Petula. She’s home on break from college. She’s such a smart girl.” The lead officer smiled over at me, then turned back to my dad. “What about it sir?” My dad agreed. My father and all the police officers went upstairs to look at the artwork on the walls of the hallway. I sat down on the couch next to my mom, exhausted. An hour later, we were in waiting room at Johns Hopkins Hospital. My dad was calm and cool until after the police officers left. Then he went off on one of the triage nurses and was restrained. The next time I saw my father was through a two-way mirror. He was in a “rubber room” wearing a straightjacket. He was curled up in a fetal position in a corner of the room. He was admitted into the psychiatric unit.

Over the next couple of days my dad was assigned a care team, which included several psychiatrists and psychologists as well as internists and a social worker. During the first week of my dad’s stay, both my mom and I spoke to various doctors over the phone and in person. We

answered tons of their questions about my dad's medical and personal history. My mom spoke to them several times a day, but only got general updates when she asked how he was doing and when would he be released. At first, my mom would not let me help her with dealing with the doctors, but after two weeks of frustration, she finally relented. I called the psychiatrist in charge of my dad's care team and asked when we could have a detailed conversation about my dad's condition. I explained while I understood a psychiatric diagnosis could take time, we really wanted to know whatever he could tell us as soon as possible. A few days after I placed this call, the psychiatrist sat down with me and my mother to give us a detailed update.

My mother, like most Black women of her era, was extremely mistrustful of white doctors, so she was guarded as we took seats in the doctor's office. Johns Hopkins Hospital didn't have the greatest reputation in Baltimore's Black community. Between the low wages it paid many of its employees, and the stories about Hopkins specializing in conducting experiments on Black patients without their consent, most Black Baltimoreans didn't have a great opinion of Hopkins. Older people warned us kids not to walk past the hospital at night because they snatched Black people off the streets and experimented on them. My mom was very upset about my dad going to Hopkins, but it was the closest hospital to our house. She became even more upset when my dad was admitted to the psychiatric ward. This would give the hospital a perfect opportunity to experiment on my dad's brain. She asked me what I thought about trying to send my dad to another hospital. Although most of the Black people I knew thought of Hopkins as a place whose only interest in Black people was experimenting on them, I thought we should give Hopkins a chance. If we took dad someplace else, it would be harder to visit my dad regularly. Hopkins was a twenty-minute walk from our house, and we could visit him daily and keep a closer eye on his progress. When we sat down in the psychiatrist's office, both my mom and I were very much on edge.

The doctor began by saying the team made a diagnosis of manic depression, which is called bipolar disorder today. It was a mood disorder where a person experiences highs and lows in their mood to dangerous and harmful extremes. He also explained manic depression wasn't something diagnosed through a specific test. A combination of things went into a diagnosis. The doctor reported dad was quite manic while in the hospital, and he experienced several deeply depressive periods. The psychiatrist and his team interviewed my dad numerous times about himself, his childhood, his upbringing, major experiences in his life, and about the history of his family's mental health.

"What did he say about me?" my mom suddenly demanded. "What did he say about us?" My mom was worried my dad might have said unkind or embarrassing things about her, and she got even more agitated as the doctor explained he could not reveal the things my dad said to the doctors. My mother said, "What kind of shit is this?" I tried to calm my mother down, but she wasn't having it. She was convinced this was a sign the hospital was trying to keep things from us, and she angrily got up, refusing to speak to the psychiatrist any further, and she began to storm out of the room. She paused to see if I was going to leave too, and when I continued to sit in the chair she yelled, "Fine! I'll see you at home!" She slammed the door behind her.

The doctor and I continued to talk.

One of the great puzzles about my dad's case was how rare it was for manic depression to manifest itself for the first time at my dad's age. Most cases of manic depression were diagnosed when the patient was much younger. The psychiatrist said he had never seen or read about a case like my dad's in his thirty years of practicing medicine. My dad was sixty-eight years old, and the doctor couldn't imagine my dad was only now having his first series of manic or depressive

episodes. The fact my dad's condition went undetected for so long was amazing to him. The doctor said my dad's psychiatric team suspected the assault on Thanksgiving night was part of a manic episode my dad was experiencing. I asked if stress could trigger manic periods, and the doctor said it was quite possible. The doctor asked if my dad had been under unusual stress recently, and I explained the manic behavior started while I was away at school. I asked the psychiatrist how untreated manic depression could affect people. He explained it almost always led to self-destructive behaviors. If manic depression went untreated or improperly treated it could cause the afflicted person to self-medicate, which could create a host of other problems – problems that could land him or her in jail or worse. The behaviors during the manic or depressive periods were typically what caused a person to seek treatment. The doctor commented again on how unheard of it was for someone my dad's age to be dealing with a first-time diagnosis of manic depression, and a key part of my dad's treatment plan would be examining that piece of the puzzle.

I told the doctor my dad probably wouldn't be there today if it hadn't been for the assault he committed, and the doctor said he really appreciated the police officer's sensitivity to my dad's situation, because such sensitivity didn't always happen. I briefly wondered if how the police officers treated us was because of my dad's deferential demeanor and white appearance. I wondered if we had looked different or behaved differently, what kinds of outcomes might have taken place. I wondered if the officer would have still taken the time to consider other possibilities for my dad's behavior if my dad hadn't gone to such pains to put his humanity on display for the officers. But was it necessary? I wondered if it saved his life, if it saved our lives. I wondered how my dad managed to hide this for so long. How much repressing of his real feelings, of his real self, did he do? How much lying to himself, how much personal Jedi mind-tricking was part of my father's day-to-day existence? Was this how he made it through life? And how much did my mother help him?

The doctor and I discussed the treatment of mental illness in Black communities. We discussed how treatment was often woefully unavailable to Black people, and certain cultural stigmas in the Black community also prevented people from getting help. The doctor told me usually the only way they treated Black patients was if they came to Hopkins from area prisons. In fact, the doctor couldn't recall the last time a Black patient wasn't referred to him through the criminal justice system. The doctor talked how it was so difficult to assess how racial oppression factored into how mental illness impacted Black people. I was pleasantly surprised at how knowledgeable he was about the racial overtones of psychiatric treatment, and I told him so. The doctor said he'd done a lot of additional reading and studying about a lot of things since my dad became his patient, and he put together a folder with copies of articles for me and my mother to read to learn more about manic depression and the treatment of mental illness in Black communities. I picked up the folder and thanked him. I also shared with him why my mom was mistrustful of him and the hospital. I asked him if he was aware of the hospital's reputation in the community, and he said, "I wish there was more we could do to address it." He encouraged me to get my mom to talk to him and his team, so they could ease her fears.

I was able to use my dad's hospitalization as my excuse to withdraw from school without penalty. I never told anyone about my real reasons for leaving school. I moved back home into my old room. My mom was a wreck, so it fell to me to assist her with handling my dad's affairs, which included picking up my dad's last paycheck from his job and collecting any belongings he

left there. I went to the apartment complex to pick up my dad's stuff, and as I waited in the lobby on a beautiful couch, a man coming out of the elevator looked at me, stopped, and then came over to me. "Are you Walter Caesar's daughter?" he asked. When I warily told him I was, he introduced himself as Sam. Sam, it turned out, was the man my dad mentioned at Thanksgiving dinner, the man he was doing his real-estate deal with. Sam plopped down beside me on the couch, talking fast like an auctioneer. He began by saying he was sorry to hear my dad was ill, but he wasn't surprised either. Sam said my dad started being short with the residents of the complex, as well as with his supervisor, whom Sam referred to as "the cunt," a few weeks ago. I also found out my dad had been fired about a week and a half before Thanksgiving because he threatened to strangle "the cunt." Sam said, "It was like he snapped or something. He was so soft spoken when he started here. I know he was upset about the house, but he didn't need to lose all his marbles."

"What house?" I asked, totally bewildered.

Sam explained he was a mortgage broker. I wondered why my dad would have been talking to a broker, but Sam saw my expression and said, "you probably don't really know what that is. Let me slow down a little." Sam went on to say my dad came to him because he wanted to buy a house in Roland Park. Roland Park was one of Baltimore's most expensive, and whitest, neighborhoods. Sam said he told my dad if he sold the house he lived in and turned the money over to Sam, Sam might be able to pull some strings and help him "flip" the old house into a new one. Sam would "work some magic" on my dad's loan application and "make it all work out." I immediately didn't trust anything Sam was saying. I might not have known much about house flipping, but I knew elderly people were often preyed upon in just this way.

Sam said there was no way my dad would have ended up in Roland Park. "Those houses up there are mid six figure homes, easily. My parents live up there, I grew up there. Plus, there's no way they would let a Black family move in there." He said neighborhood associations in neighborhoods like Roland Park often bought homes in their neighborhoods before they came on the market, and then would work to find suitable buyers. "But your dad was determined to live there. I mean, your dad is nice and all, but people just aren't comfortable with Black neighbors, unless they're Black themselves I guess. But I was going to take care of him." Sam made plans to put our family in a nice house over in West Baltimore in Edmonson Village. "Let him be with his own kind, you know? But your dad was so hung up about Roland Park. I finally told him it wasn't going to happen." Sam said my dad started talking about how Sam promised to take care of him, and my dad got angry. Sam said, "Why would I move him into a house better than any most white people have? Doesn't even make sense."

I hated the way he babbled on, speaking to me like I was a total fool. I wanted to cut him off, but I realized I might never know what really happened if I didn't let Sam continue spilling. So, I bit my tongue. I found out my dad wasn't working the concierge desk at the apartment complex. He was a janitor, mopping floors, removing trash, and cleaning bathrooms. He sat at the concierge desk when the regular person who worked the desk took lunch. He got on his supervisor's bad side at first for being "too chatty" with the people who lived in the building. He constantly asked about real estate investing, saying he was working there to help put me through school and to buy a new home for his family. My dad also took too long to do his work. Sam told me about a couple of incidents where the elevators were out of order and my dad had to walk up and down many flights of steps all day, and he did it too slowly for his supervisor's liking. Sam said "the cunt" was always mean to my dad for no reason. Sure, he was a little slow, but he was old. It was to be expected. Sam also told me my dad was supposed to get my mom to sign

paperwork giving my dad control of the deed, so he could sell the house and get the money Sam said he needed. But my mom refused. Sam continued babbling about how my dad said he was going to get the papers signed, but Sam hadn't heard from my dad once he got fired. Sam also told me security removed my dad from the premises the day "the cunt" fired him, because my dad became loud and belligerent, threatening to kill his supervisor and blow up the building. Instead of calling the police, security took him outside and talked to him to calm him down, then put him in a cab and sent him home. Sam was interrupted when someone called me over to the desk to give me my dad's final paycheck, and a small bag. I went home more informed and more puzzled about my dad than ever before. I told my mother what I learned, and she was horrified.

My dad was hospitalized for several months. He fell into a catatonic state. He lingered in that state for weeks. He did not respond to any of the things the doctors tried to do for him. The doctor in charge of the care team offered electric shock treatment as a last resort. As extreme as it sounded, he strongly recommended it because of my dad's declining condition. My mom refused to sign the papers, but she gave me permission to make decisions about my dad's care. After doing a lot of my own research, I signed paperwork giving them permission to administer the treatments. I was terrified at first, thinking of all the Black people who told me how Hopkins loved to do just this kind of thing. What if they were right? My mom ominously made references to the Jack Nicholson character in *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, which didn't make me feel any better. But the first couple of sessions were extremely successful, and my dad was immediately more responsive afterwards. Suddenly it was as if every medical student at Hopkins wanted to study my dad's case. Endless students came by when I met with the care team, taking tons of notes. Initially I allowed them to be present to further their education, but after a while it got to be too much for me, and I stopped letting them come. My dad got two to three treatments over several weeks, after which time I asked the doctor to stop. I was still nervous about their intentions, and I was satisfied with my dad's progress. My dad was fully awake now, walking on his own, eating regular meals, and feeling much better. He was like his old self. The doctor agreed, and my father was moved into a regular room on a floor where I could visit him more often. One day when I was visiting him, he asked me if I talked to anyone at his job. I told him I knew what happened. When I asked him why he wanted to buy a house in Roland Park so badly, he told me a story. "Do you remember Mr. Glassman?" my dad asked.

When we lived in New Jersey, we rented our house from a Jewish man named Mr. Glassman. Mr. Glassman also owned other houses in Paterson. My dad would invite him inside when he came over to the house to pick up the rent. As a little girl, I wanted to ask Mr. Glassman about the little beanie he always wore, but I never did. But I thought it was cute, and I wanted to wear one too. Mr. Glassman and my dad would talk a little bit about current events, and my dad would have me read to Mr. Glassman sometimes, to show him how smart I was. I thought my dad and Mr. Glassman were friends. My dad told me he asked Mr. Glassman about buying one of the bigger houses he owned. It was a house in the nicer and whiter part of town, which was bigger and more spacious. Mr. Glassman would always put him off about it until one day my dad pressed him, saying he saved up money for the down payment. There were tears in my dad's eyes as he told me what Mr. Glassman said to him.

"That dirty kike said to me, John, I like you. I like your family. Your wife and daughter are nice people. People warned me about renting to colored. But you haven't been any trouble at all – rent always on time, house well-taken care of. The problem probably wouldn't even be you. It would be your friends. Your other family members. What happens when they come over? Sorry John. I can't do it."

My dad sat very still as he finished his story. Two plaintive tears rolled down each cheek of his face. For the first time, I noticed how very *tired* my dad appeared. "I just wanted the beautiful home for us we deserved," he continued. "All my life I wanted a house. A backyard. A nice neighborhood. Was I wrong?"

I said to my dad, "no. You weren't wrong dad." And I gave my dad a hug.

Sam's revelations about my dad's plan to move us into Roland Park was a very important piece of information for me when he initially told me about it. My dad's revelation about his conversation with Mr. Glassman added another important piece. I began to really give thought to how hard my dad always worked to make wherever we lived beautiful. In New Jersey, he was always painting rooms, repairing broken things, hanging artwork, placing sculptures and adding other decorative touches here and there in our home. He always gave my mom money to buy new curtains to match our couches and chairs. She made sure our kitchen boasted beautiful flatware, tablecloths and placemats. When we moved to Baltimore, my parents brought new furniture for the house, laid out lace tablecloths and lace doilies on all the tabletops, and even planted flowers in the planters on our front porch. My dad always wanted a beautiful home. He worked hard for it all his life. Did he think Sam was his last chance to finally give his family the home he wanted for us? Was this the key to understanding my dad's descent into his manic depression? The next time I met with my dad's psychiatrist, I told him about these two incidents, and about how my dad always labored to improve our living space. I asked the doctor if this might have something to do with my dad's sudden break. Perhaps Sam's unwillingness to help him get a new home was the final straw.

The doctor looked at me, then asked, "Why did your dad want to live in Roland Park?"

My train of thought slowed. I was confused. "Well, for the same reasons white people want to live there I guess. Because it's a nice neighborhood with beautiful homes and good schools."

The doctor responded with, "Why wasn't he satisfied with the home you lived in? Was it in bad shape?"

"No," I responded. "Why?"

"You all own the home you live in, don't you? I believe your family inherited it? Quite an accomplishment for someone of his background. I would imagine most Black people don't own their homes."

I was still lost. "I don't know. Why couldn't he have the house he wanted to have? No one asks white people why they want what they want."

The doctor was silent. "You know what? I never thought of it that way."

Finally, it clicked for me. I understood the conversation we were having. I closed my eyes and prayed to everyone I could think of. I just wanted my dad out of Johns Hopkins Hospital as soon as possible, healthy and whole.