

PORTRAIT IN LIMBO-LAND

At the beginning of her last spring break at college, Tanya packed some clothes in the old blue plastic-sided suitcase that had once belonged to her father. She called a cab. Her mother Marce probably would have come and picked her up, but Tanya had never once asked for that. If Tanya got home under her own steam, she and her mother could both pretend that Tanya was being independent, the way a grown woman should be. They could pretend that the real issue wasn't how much time they would have to spend together, or the fact that both of them were counting the minutes until Tanya went back to school.

The cab picked Tanya up at the main campus entrance. It snugged up as close to the curb as it could, getting out of the way of the city traffic that sped down the main drag. Tanya shoved her suitcase in the backseat and climbed in the front.

"Where you headed?" the driver asked.

Tanya glanced sideways at him. She always found herself comparing men she met to Daddy and noticing the ones that looked like him, as if that would bring him back. This man did have a tall, thin build, narrow shoulders, and cinnamon-colored skin, but he was too young. Tanya's father would have been middle-aged by now. Also, this man's eyes were more hazel than bottle-glass-brown, and Daddy had never worn T-shirts if he could help it. Besides, most importantly, no one else would ever have the right smile.

Tanya said, "1304 Terrence Street, please."

The cab slipped out into the stream of traffic. It was almost five o'clock on Monday afternoon and the streets were packed. Cars nudged for space in the too-narrow lanes. Horns

blasted whenever someone wasn't quick enough to hit the gas at a green light. Exhaust made a haze in the air.

Tanya could have gone home on Friday, because there hadn't been any classes over the weekend, but she and Marce didn't need the extra couple of days together. They got into too many fights as it was. Now Tanya looked out at the too-hot, too-orange late afternoon sky, which pressed down on the cars and the roofs of the tall buildings like a smothering blanket. She had known this city all her life. Somehow it felt different to let it absorb her again after she had been at school for a while. The bright-lit, gleaming university buildings made the cracked pavements, graffitied walls, and worn-out rowhouses look dingier than Tanya remembered.

The cab driver navigated a turn. "So you go to school right here, huh? And you live in town?"

"Uh huh," Tanya said.

"You like that school?" he asked. Tanya nodded. "What you study?"

Tanya glanced at him again. For a split second – *grow up, girl, why can't you?* – she thought about what it would have been like if Daddy had been here to drive her home. What they would have talked about right now, at the end of her last semester of college.

"Art," she said. "Painting and drawing."

Not photography, though. Never that. If Daddy had been here, he would have understood: the camera had been *his* fascination, *his* right. Tanya wouldn't touch it now, and neither did her mother.

The cab driver looked confused, the way so many people did when Tanya talked about her major. He said, "So you gonna be, what? An artist?"

He said it like it was a word in a foreign language and he wasn't quite sure what it meant. Tanya willed herself not to flinch, but she felt her face get hot. She had heard the same question

before, too many times, from her mother. The only difference now was that the driver wasn't accusing her. His voice didn't have Marce's sarcastic edge, and Tanya couldn't hear the *what are you, stupid?* behind his words.

No need to start a fight here. Tanya kept her voice as light and polite as she could. "I don't know yet. I'm gonna figure it out."

Her teachers wanted her to stay on at school next year and do a grad degree. The school would pay for it, and Tanya would get more time in the art studio, where just to walk in the door and breathe the scents of fresh paper and ink felt like coming home. When she took her seat in her usual wooden chair by the corner window, propped a canvas up on its easel, chose a paintbrush or charcoal or pastel and held it between her fingers, she felt as if she was putting the pieces of herself together. She knew, though, that the extra time at school would only postpone the final decision she would have to make. Which was: how a black city girl could make a living doing something that nobody needed.

A lot of her high-school classmates hadn't bothered to graduate. If you grew up in the ghetto, you knew that a diploma, which after all was just a piece of paper, wouldn't buy milk or tuna fish. It wouldn't take away your sister's unwanted baby, or stop a bullet, bring back your best friend who had OD'd. Tanya, and the handful of other kids who had gone to college, were the lucky ones. They were the ones who came from "limbo-land," as Tanya called it in her head: the place you got between the ghetto, which was waiting to eat you if you put a foot wrong, and good, where the white people lived.

To her relief, the cab driver didn't ask her any more questions about her major or what she was going to do with herself. As he negotiated the streets in her neighborhood, she took limbo-land in. The rowhouses here had strips of mowed yard, flowerpots on the porch, and lawn chairs out front. The paint, though, was peeling off the houses' gingerbread wood carving, and the concrete

porches had cracks in them, and every house had iron grating to pull across the front windows, to stop a rock or a bat or a fist. The people in limbo-land hung onto what they had with their fingernails. This place didn't need artists. Tanya knew that.

When the cab pulled up in front of 1304 Terrence Street, the paint-peeling, carpet-fraying rowhouse where Tanya had grown up, she paid the driver and hoisted her suitcase out. As she hauled the suitcase through the iron front gate, he hit the gas and headed off to find his next client.

Tanya went down the tiny walk and up to the porch, avoiding the trick bottom step, which had cracked in half and settled into the ground on a slant. Daddy had planned to fix that, years ago, but had never gotten the chance. Late-afternoon sun fell across the porch and lit up the purple petunias in the terra-cotta pot Marce had set out. In the kissing light, their petals looked like velvet. Sometimes the air in the city felt thick and dirty enough to make you want to hold your nose, but tonight a light breeze stirred the petunia leaves and Tanya caught a breath of freshness.

Next door, bald-headed Pete Jackson was using a faded hose to spray down a window box of marigolds. "Hey, Tan!" he called. "Break time?"

Tanya smiled, digging her keys out of her pocket. "Sure is," she said. Pete had lived next door since before Tanya was born, and she remembered when he'd had a full head of charcoal-black hair. "How are you, Mr. Jackson?"

"Oh, fine, fine." The old man turned the stream of water onto a planter that held a big leafy bush with leaves that looked like someone had dripped yellow paint on them. "You're gonna graduate this year, that right?"

"Uh huh."

Pete shook his head. "Man, I wish your dad could have seen that."

People had said the same thing to Tanya for years. They had said it when she left grade school for junior high, and again when she left junior high for high school, and then when she had

made the honor roll in her graduating class. *Your daddy would have been so proud.* Sure, he would have, but that didn't bring him here now to point his camera at her so she could put on her best grin and hold up her diploma for as long as he wanted, in her black gown and black cap with the tassel on it, while the flash went off hot and white in her face. As it was, there were no pictures, no memories, because he had been the one who made them.

Tanya told the neighbor good night, fit her key in the stubborn old lock and pushed the front door open. The spicy-hot smell of Cajun dirty rice rushed out to meet her. Tanya's stomach growled. She and Marce didn't agree on much, but they both loved Cajun cooking. She dragged her suitcase into the narrow front hall, swallowed her nerves the way she always did, and called, "Hey, Marce, I'm home!"

Quick sharp footsteps echoed in the kitchen. When Marce came into the hallway, Tanya saw that she was wearing tight-fitting blue jeans and a white T-shirt, but she had kept on the navy pumps she wore to her secretary job, and she had re-tied a pale flowery cotton scarf around her neck. She wore those scarves to work every day.

For as long as Tanya could remember, her mother had called herself ugly. When Daddy used to take pictures on Christmas morning, so many years ago, Marce had told him to stop it. *Don't you do that, Bruce. Nobody wants to see me on that film.* Marce said she had to wear pretty shoes and pretty scarves so people would look at them instead of her face. Now her pumps clicked on the scuffed wooden floor as she came down the hall to the foyer.

Tanya still hadn't gotten used to the fact that she and her mother stood eye to eye now. Both of them were a lot shorter than Daddy had been, but Tanya had always had to look up at her mother's thin, set mouth and the eyes that looked as dark and flat as black coffee. Mommy had become Marce right after Daddy died. *Marce* and *Bruce* at least sounded sort of alike. In those days, Tanya had learned to move around the house as quick and silent as a shadow, and she had learned

not to cry and not to look for her mother's smile. Marce hadn't seemed to notice the change of name. At least she had never asked why her daughter had stopped calling her what a daughter should.

Now Tanya faced her mother. The two of them were the same height, but Marce had much darker skin, the color of the heavy wooden frames Tanya used at school to prop up her canvases while she worked. Marce looked Tanya up and down, taking in her daughter's face and clothes and hair. What she saw seemed to satisfy her. She nodded.

"Come on and help me fix the cornbread."

No hug, no welcome home, but Tanya was used to that. Her stomach unclenched as her mother tapped and clicked away down the hall in her pumps.

For now, for the first night, maybe they didn't have to talk about school or what Tanya was going to do with herself, and maybe they didn't have to start yelling at each other. Maybe they could just be in this house together, the way they would have been if Daddy wasn't gone.

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For the next three days, mother and daughter edged around each other like a couple of wary cats. They shared the same air and faced each other across the kitchen table, and for three days, nothing happened to shred the strained peace.

Then, on the second-to-last night of break, a man died in the city.

It was on the news. Tanya sat with Marce on the sagging couch in the living room and watched the broadcast. The TV sat in the corner where the artificial Christmas tree used to go. Daddy had always been the one who put that tree together, snapping the plastic branches into their base, stringing on the white lights and tinsel, wrapping the red and green boxes that turned up on the carpet Christmas morning. Now, in place of the tree and lights and bright wrapping paper, there was the black-and-white TV and the story about the man who had died.

Tanya had never heard of him. He was just a young man from limbo-land, tall and gangly, with skin the color of Tanya's own. She wouldn't have looked at him twice if she'd met him on the street. For some reason, the newscasters said nobody was sure why, he had ended up in the back of a police van. The cops driving the van were white. Inside that metal shell, where the world couldn't see, something had happened. He had gone in on his feet, but when the van doors opened again, the cops were carrying his broken body out.

Tanya sat on the couch and looked at footage of the man's family, a heavy-faced mother crying on camera, a sister strung as taut as a highwire. The same words spilled out of both women's mouths. *He didn't do nothing. I don't understand.*

After the first few seconds, Tanya stopped listening. She still looked at the images on the TV, the women's mouths moving, but she didn't see them clearly. Instead she saw a night sixteen years ago, when her mother had stood in the kitchen holding the phone receiver in her hand, her face so stiff it looked like a touch would shatter it.

It had been a couple of weeks after the New Year. Daddy had been driving home from work as usual. It was dark out; in the winter it got dark by five o'clock. He had pulled into a gas station. That much, witnesses could say for sure. They could also say for sure that a police car had pulled in behind him, and that while he was pumping gas, a cop holding a pistol had gotten out of the cruiser. After that, things had happened too fast. The next thing anyone knew, Daddy lay on the cement pad with a hole in his chest and the cop stood over him, still training the pistol on his body.

Afterward, the police dropped their investigation, saying the cop had fired in self-defense. He had thought Daddy was armed, because he saw the black camera bag on the car's front seat, and he'd guessed it had a gun inside.

Even at age six, Tanya had known that her father would never have known what to do with a gun. He had only ever aimed his camera, only ever shot pictures. As to why the police had gone

after him in the first place, the police department called it mistaken identity. The cops in the cruiser had been chasing some other black man of Daddy's height and build. The department gave Tanya and her mother some money, a token for Daddy's lost income, and then washed their hands of the whole thing.

Now Tanya watched the two lost women on TV. *He didn't do nothing. I don't understand.* She wondered, in a tiny clear part of her head, what the police department would say this time. Who they would say they had been chasing when they loaded this man into their van. How much money they would toss at his mother and sister to make up for his loss.

Then the TV snapped off. Tanya barely realized the image had disappeared before her mother rounded on her.

"This is what I been telling you. That school. Those painting classes. You know that shit ain't worth a thing."

The couch under Tanya felt like quicksand and her brain was cold and empty. Her mother said, "You got dreams? Girl, dreams don't matter."

In a tiny clear part of her head, Tanya thought it might have been better if Marce had shouted. If she had shouted, maybe Tanya would have gotten mad enough to yell back, and the two of them would have had one of the fights they both knew Pete Jackson could hear through his walls. Instead, Marce's eyes stayed cold and flat, her voice quiet but as tight as a rubber band about to snap. She said, "The world don't care what you want. You get out of that school and you gonna get chewed up and spit out. Jesus, girl, you ought to know that by now."

Tanya did know. She knew it so clearly that she couldn't move, not to twitch a finger, not to force her lungs to suck in some air. The world didn't care about dreams. It hadn't cared that Daddy had a wife and little girl at home. It didn't care that Tanya and Marce stumbled along now like a

couple of cripples, or that the two of them each hurt too much to hold one another up, or that Tanya hadn't called her mother "Mom" in sixteen years, as if she didn't have any parent left at all.

Marce didn't say anything else. She got up and left the room, leaving Tanya alone on the couch, staring at the black TV screen.

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The next day, her last day of break, Tanya ran some laundry while Marce went out for groceries. The fragile peace had come back. Marce usually didn't want to fight right before Tanya went back to school. Normally Tanya would have been grateful, but today she felt too tired and cold to care much.

After this spring break, graduation would be the next time she and Marce would see each other. Tanya had worked hard for her degree. No one in the family had ever gotten one from college before. Now, though, that piece of paper felt worthless, just a fake thing she would hold up at the ceremony and pretend it mattered.

She went into her mother's bedroom with the basket of laundry. After Daddy died, Marce had cleared his reading chair and dresser out of the little master bedroom. She had sold the queen bed the two of them had shared and replaced it with a twin. Some women would have thought about leaving room in their house for another man, but Marce had never considered it.

It had taken Tanya a long time to get used to how big and empty the bedroom felt. Now she piled her mother's laundry on the bed and began folding it in neat stacks: jeans, socks, T-shirts, and the little pile of cotton scarves that Marce wore with her work blazers. They were soft and almost translucent, each one with its own pastel pattern of flowers. Even though Tanya had seen Marce wear them countless times, and knew why she did it, Tanya had never quite been able to reconcile such fragile and delicate things with her mother.

She put the rest of the laundry away and then opened the bottom dresser drawer, where Marce kept the scarves. The rest of the drawer was full of papers and envelopes: financial stuff, tax information, paperwork on the rowhouse's mortgage. Tanya laid the scarves carefully in the left-hand corner, on top of the manila envelope marked *Car Payments* in her mother's neat, angular handwriting. As she was about to shut the drawer, something caught her eye.

The corner of a plain, yellowing envelope stuck out underneath the manila one. Tanya didn't know what made her reach in and slide it out, unless it was the simple fact that in all the other times she had opened this drawer, she had never noticed it before.

It had no label on it and wasn't sealed. The flap moved stiffly, as if no one had opened it in a long time.

Photographs, printed on slick heavy paper. Tanya carefully slid the first one out. She saw herself, in the brand-new velvet dress she had worn for Christmas when she was six years old, holding up a green-wrapped box and grinning her best grin.

She closed her eyes. Behind her eyelids, she saw Daddy lifting the camera on that last Christmas morning. *Ready? One...two...three!* The white flash went off like all the little tree lights flaring at once.

Downstairs, the front door creaked open. Tanya opened her eyes at the same time as Marce's voice called, "Tan? Come help me with these bags."

Tanya jumped to her feet. "I'm coming."

Would her mother notice the envelope was missing? When was the last time she had looked at it? Tanya had to risk it. Back in her room, she stowed the envelope in her suitcase, under a pair of jeans. She snapped the case shut and ran downstairs.

Tonight she and Marce would circle each other like cats again. Tomorrow Tanya would be back at school. She could hold on that long.

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A week later, the city caught fire.

Tanya was working alone in the art studio. Every day since she had gotten back to school, she had spent every hour she could spare there, sitting in front of a canvas with a sixteen-year-old Christmas photo propped up next to her.

Earlier today, the news had covered the funeral for the young man from limbo-land who had gone into the police van. Tanya had listened on the news feed on the studio's laptop. While the man's family urged peace, other young men and women took matters into their own hands. Tanya listened as the newscasters "strongly encouraged" people to get out of the downtown shopping districts early. Traffic on every major highway out of the city snarled hopelessly as people from the suburbs fled back to safety. Meanwhile, the people who lived downtown ran home as fast as they could and barricaded their doors. At school, campus police encouraged everyone to stay inside and keep both eyes open for "suspicious activity."

Tanya stayed alone in the studio as night settled on the city. At first the streets went eerily quiet. Then, in some neighborhoods, anger burst into flame.

Sidewalks crunched with broken glass. Buildings went up like candles, leaving clouds of smoke hanging in the sky to hide the stars. Tanya listened to it happening on the news feed and thought about how all of this was because a man had died. She bent over the canvas, carefully layering oil paint inside the portrait she had outlined days ago in pencil. After what had happened to Daddy, the city had gone on about its business without a hitch. Now, anger woke up, grabbed the world by the shoulders, and shook it until its teeth rattled.

Marce was all right. Tanya had talked to her a couple of hours ago. Her mother had gotten home from work and reported that their neighborhood was quiet, and Tanya knew from the news

that the real trouble was going down in other parts of the city. Marce had told Tanya to be careful anyway. “You stay in that dorm, Tan. Don’t you go outside, hear me?”

Tanya had said yes, but she couldn’t afford to huddle in her room. She had too much work to do. Besides, on this night, she only wanted to do one thing.

She had gone through the envelope of Christmas photos once she was safely back at school after break. She knew Daddy must have chosen which of the pictures he had taken that morning to print out. That would have been the last roll he took before he died.

Going through them, Tanya had known she would see herself again and again, maybe with different packages, or unwrapped packages, or a slightly different grin. She strained to remember, though, whether there was any chance she or Marce had taken the camera and snapped a photo of Daddy too. In her dorm room, flipping through the pictures, she wondered if any second, she would find him smiling out at her.

She didn’t. Instead, she found something else.

Marce had told him not to take pictures of her. Tanya remembered it perfectly: *nobody wants to see me on that film*. But he hadn’t listened.

Now, in the studio, the photo propped up next to Tanya wasn’t of herself or her father. The woman in the photo didn’t face the camera. She was looking at something else, something Tanya couldn’t see, and she was laughing.

Her smooth skin was the rich brown of old wood. Her eyes looked bright and alive. Looking at her, Tanya could almost hear her pure, joyful laughter rippling in the air, floating like one of those flower-patterned cotton scarves she loved. She was beautiful.

Tanya dipped her brush in the fresh paint mixed on her palette. Outside, pain seared the city. Inside, she traced her mother’s smile onto the canvas.

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Graduation happened three weeks later. The portfolios were complete, the grades turned in, honor roll standings and prizes awarded. On the morning of the ceremony, the sun poured down on the university campus like melted butter into a pan.

The backstage rooms and hallways behind the university's big theater were jammed with graduates. Splashes of color flashed in the sea of black caps and gowns: the gold tassels on the caps; the multicolored collars the master's and doctorate students wore; big-beaded glowing necklaces and earrings; pairs of sparkling sandals, patent-leather high heels, even some neon sneakers. Talk and laughter bounced off the walls.

Tanya stood with the other art students. They had made it through their four years together. There were hugs and laughter and some tears as they waited for the call to line up and process onto the stage. "Lookin' good, Miss Tan." "Lookin' good yourself."

Outside the university campus, the city limped along. The rioting had destroyed homes and businesses. Charred buildings and blocked-off streets were standing reminders of the anger that still festered under the city's carefully-replaced veneer.

When the ceremony began, Tanya filed onstage and took her place among the rows of undergrads. Who knew what the real world was going to hand her or anyone else, tomorrow or the next day? For now, she had this morning.

And this morning, out of the crowd that filled the theater, one face mattered. Tanya couldn't see much from where she sat, squeezed in the middle of the second row of chairs, but as the dean of the university read out names and students stood up to receive their diplomas, Tanya thought about the painting hanging in the living room at home.

She had run it home on a weekend, in one of the quick surprise visits some of her friends gave their families all the time, but that she had never done before. Marce had unwrapped the portrait and stared at it. *Why would you do a thing like that? Girl, you know I don't belong in no painting.* But

she hadn't been able to take her eyes off it. Tanya had stood by, keeping her face and hands quiet while her heart danced inside her, as her mother examined the canvas one brushstroke at a time. Finally Marce raised her head and met her daughter's eyes.

So this is what you do with your paints, bub? Take some ugly old thing and make it pretty.

Tanya hadn't wasted her breath on *you're not ugly*. There was no need to say something that obvious, especially after Marce had found a nail and some wire and hung the portrait on the wall, above the TV set. It would stay there, to tell the truth to anyone who saw it.

Now, sitting in the theater, Tanya heard her own name called. She stood up, moved carefully around the end of the row of chairs, and stepped to the front of the stage. Her heels rang against the floor. Clapping and cheering washed over her from both sides, stage and house. As she reached out the way everyone had practiced – *shake the dean's hand with your right, take the diploma with your left* – she looked out at the crowd.

One person was standing up. Front and center, holding a camera.

Ready? One...two...three! And the flash as bright as all the little tree lights flaring together. The white flash went off as Tanya's hand closed around the smooth roll of the diploma.

Your daddy would have been so proud.

Marce lowered the camera. Still standing, smiling, she raised her hand in a thumbs-up.

After she had hung the picture, Marce had stepped back to look at it one more time. She hadn't smiled once, not when she unwrapped it, not while she stared at it, not when she carefully straightened it on the wall and looked around at Tanya. Quietly, she said, *Well, all right, girl. You go on with yourself.*

Tanya had understood what that meant. She understood it now, as she faced her mother across the crowded auditorium, and saw the smile she had so often missed when she was growing

up. The smile she had wanted during all the long and lonely times when “Marce” had been a distant, cold figure, locked in grief, worlds away from the “Mommy” Tanya ached for.

So that's what you do with your paints. You take some ugly thing and make it pretty.

Standing on the stage, Tanya caught the dean's “Congratulations.” She managed a “Thank you, sir,” but didn't take her eyes off her mother.

You make it pretty. Yes. That was what the colors and canvas were for. That was why you held onto a dream in an ugly world.

With her diploma in her hand, in a moment that took no more than a heartbeat but somehow seemed much bigger, Tanya raised her free hand in a thumbs-up to answer her mother's. As she did it, she mouthed two words.

Thanks, Mom.