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BLACK LIFE, BLACK ROMANCE, BLACK BEAUTY, BLACK HISTORY

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BLACK FEMINISM

PAST, PRESENT, & FUTURE

MET GALA: WHO CAME TO SLAY? / FALL ON A BUDGET

"MUCH ADO ABOUT PIZZA" / WHEN GOD WAS A WOMAN

A MOUSE NO MORE / + MORE INSIDE

#MeToo

Met Gala: Who Came to Slay?

By: Brookes Washington

Hello ladies! As we know, the Met Gala just passed, and with it, we had the bold, the beautiful, and unfortunately ... the ugly! Today we are here to sip coffee, tea, the new cleansing juice your friend was dying for you to try, or anything else that wets your whistle as we dissect the night's most memorable outfits!
For something as prominent as the Met Gala, we have to keep it thematic. As in let's stick to the theme people! This year's theme was American. So, who nailed the looks and the theme?

Lupita: Darling, was giving very much Britney Spears circa early 2000s. Nothing more American than jean on top of jean on top of you guessed it, jean! She stunned with her Natural hair, natural makeup, and natural beauty! She's a 10 in our books!

Ciara: Three things to say to Ciara. Honey, this long sequin dress is giving what all the girls came for! Where can we find a Russel? Please, tell us the prayer girl! What's more American than football and a quarterback?!

Keke: Get over here sis! You were giving me very much Diana Ross and Cover Girl! Yet another sequins dress stole our hearts and kept us on theme with 70s glam and a personality that all the girls love! Hey, Ms. Keke, call me girl!

And then some tried to slay ... in all the wrong ways. So let's talk about it!

Taraji: We love you. The girls love you! But mama, where were you going with that Daffy the Duck suit? Baby no! This jumpsuit is for the baby doll you stole it from. You could do better, and we expect nothing less from you. I'm sorry, love, but we must pass on this look.

Whoopi: Come here, Ms. Goldberg. We love you too! We know you were in the Color Purple, but ABSOLUTELY NO ONE told you to bring it to the Met Gala. Again, we love you, but this dress was a purple sac we did not need, and neither did you.

Saweetie: Saweetie, our icy girl. She gave too much Fashion Nova with a sprinkle of nothing spectacular for the Gala. The dress gave us a whole lot of nothing. The overall look was a sore miss that could've been so much more. Instead, all we saw was another skimpy outfit from the "My Type" rapper.

Who won the night?

Iman. Goddess of the Sun. Goddess of Life. Giving the girls what they never knew they needed in class, in design, and, dare I say, in life. Only a legend can pull this off for us! I don't think there's anything left to be said. #TeamSpeechless

Black Feminism: Past, Present, and Future

"Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political and economic equality of the sexes."

-Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, TEDxEuston December 2012

While this is not the first time the world had heard about feminism, this talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche was influential in bringing the word "feminist" into the cultural lexicon. While this is the most famous section of her speech, as sampled by Beyonce in the song "Flawless," it does not dive deeply enough into the subject Adiche is speaking about in her talk, namely the type of feminism that is practiced by Black women.

Adiche speaks in a relatable and informative way about intersectional feminism, especially feminism for African women. As a Nigerian native who splits her time between there and the United States, she has experienced both countries' approaches to feminism. She uses this experience to talk about feminism, continuing a long tradition of Black women's consciousness-raising groups, starting in the 1970s, examining how far people have come and just how much farther we have to go.

Around the time of the Civil Rights Movement and Second Wave of Feminism, Black women started to publicly carve out their own place separate from popular feminism and the Black Panther movements. Ula Y. Taylor points out in their article "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism," Black feminists were being torn between "the politically conservative, self-serving rhetoric of both white women and Black men" (19). While they were part of both communities, they were not given space to assert themselves or advocate for their own needs.

While they were active members and participants, they were ignored when it came to issues addressed in the activist sphere. They decided to form their own clubs and societies because of the rampant "sexism in the Black Power movement and racism in the women's liberation movement (Taylor 19). Feminism was associated with white middle class women, and Black Power was associated with Black men, leaving the group at the intersection of these movements without a place. Rather than continuing with the status quo, they started their own movement.

A young group in Boston called the Combahee River Collective, released a statement in 1977 outlining why they, Black lesbian women, have created their own group of people who will be working on a movement all their own. They reminded the world that "Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement

from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure [their] participation." Though they were all well-versed in the feminist and Black Power movements, they felt that they had a need to create a space for Black women in particular, elevating them where other popular movements have silenced them.

The members of the Collective laid out the ways they will work for Black women, basing it all in "a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allow[ed them] to continue [their] struggle and work." They were not militant like many viewed the popular feminist movement, and like many view to this day, the Black Power movement. Rather, they were approaching from a place of caring for their community and selves. Their goals were, like other Black feminist movements at the time, actual health care and support for Black women. This particular example is emblematic of "the creation of institutions that value Black women-their bodies and their minds" that became a hallmark of Black feminism in the seventies and eighties (Taylor 26).

Their other goal was to work on "eliminating racism in the white women's movement," even though it "is by definition work for white women to do." While mainstream feminists were focused on themselves, the Black women were working on equality for all people, not just middle-class white women. By practicing what they preached, the Black feminist movement gave rise to the womanist movement, as defined by Alice Walker. One of the staples of womanism is "'love' of culture and 'self'" (Taylor 26). By basing womanism in love, rather than militarism or anger, Walker highlights what is really the epitome of Black feminism.

This is furthered in the work of pioneering intersectional feminist Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, author of "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color," among many others. In this particular essay from 1991, she talked about how differences between people, rather than needing to be erased to form a true equal society, should be seen as the "source of social empowerment and reconstruction" (1242). She pointed out that, because Black women have two different political battles going on at once, they have to "split" their "political energies" in ways that cause them "disempowerment that men of color and white women seldom confront" (1252).

Through the perspectives of these Black women, as well as the path that they carved out for themselves through love of self and love of their community, Black feminism moved to the main stage of the feminist movement.

Today, the Black woman's experience is situated in a more complex socioeconomic

cultural milieu. The Black feminist movement during the second wave of the American women's movement in the 1970s has surely come a long way, evolving to what we see now in our modern era. Currently, in this fourth-wave feminism, contemporary Black feminism, which includes issues related to the Black LGBTQ+ community as well, is not without controversy, especially when it comes to the 21st century Black family. According to Kimberly Springer, former Black Studies professor at Portland State University, third-wave Black feminism in the 1970s forced Black feminists to disproportionately prioritize their organizing time for activism. Because of the feminist pushback challenges then and now, Black feminists often exhaust most of their energy striving for legitimization within the Black communities. And as Springer points out, this battle for racial and gender equality is somewhat untenable because Black feminists are frequently in the unique position of "advocating a love for Black men while passionately hating Black sexism" (1059).

Despite this dichotomy, Black women are still considered as the central figures in our modern-day civil rights movements—such as, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. With the constant spotlight on Black feminists, some critics argue that the multidimensional approach to resist racism, sexism, and all other "-isms" has led to unintended consequences for the traditional Black family. They believe today's world Black feminism is misguided, focusing entirely too much on social equality and sexual rights and not enough on economic equality for Black Americans. As a result, these critics portend that this disregard in the struggle for economic equality ultimately destroys the Black family in which the children are the unfortunate victims because of the likelihood of perpetuated poverty.

Since Black women are in this remarkably historical moment, the vituperative attacks against their feminism are ongoing insofar as remaining in the public discourse. For instance, Adam B. Coleman, Black author and founder of the Wrong Speak website, says that feminism damages Black women and their families, defrauding them of authentic female agency and empowerment:

> Feminism encourages black women to exert false masculine energy and reject true femininity so that they will continue to compete with any black man that she attempts to have a relationship with and increasing the likeliness of family separation. The black father is a threat to the matriarchal dominant power structure of the modern black family and feminists cannot have this power imbalance readjusted. The feminist view of the black father is that of a man that wants his power back but the reality is that we want our family back.

So, is this the prevailing sentiment in our society? If we make use of Coleman's metrics for understanding the dynamic between feminism and the Black family—especially, its correlation to the Black relationship between men and women, then Kenya Barris' ABC television series, Black-ish, perhaps might reinforce his ad hominem fallacy. The bi-racial —White father and Black mother—female protagonist, Dr. "Bow" Rainbow Johnson (Tracee Ellis Ross), is an anesthesiologist who does not shy away from fervently expressing her viewpoints and opinions to her husband, Andre "Dre" Johnson, Sr. (Anthony Anderson), about how they raise their Black children. More pointedly, in the episode, "Johnson & Johnson," Dre discovers that Bow never legally took his last name. Does this mean that Bow is destroying their family because she did not adhere to the conventions of taking on the Black male's last name?

However, on the other hand, Black feminists are not without supportive allies. The website article, "Stop Saying Black Feminism Destroyed the Black Family," discusses how the Hotepian logic—an Afrocentric Black American movement based on the Egyptian term, "Hotep," meaning "to be satisfied, at peace"—is pervasive on many social media platforms. The definition of Hotep intriguingly has morphed into meaning many different things within the Black community, especially when it relates to the Afrocentric Black male's interpretation of Black pride and family values. The Hoteps believe that Black feminism is designed to emasculate the Black heterosexual male and the patriarchal family structure. In the broadest sense, Hoteps are anti-progress and not interested in equality for all people because arguably, they want to replace White male patriarchy with Black male patriarchy. As Asher Primus (AfroPunk website contributor) asserts: "What really destroyed the black family was black people trying to live up to the white definition of patriarchy while forgetting that other [people of color] may not live a heteronormative lifestyle." Thus, Coleman's cause for disagreement in this regard ostensibly becomes a moot point for further discourse on Black feminism.

Consequently, Black academic scholar Patricia Hill Collins writes: "As feminist scholarship quite rightly points out, the very categories of public and private, work and family, structure and culture rely heavily on specific gender configurations" (51). In other words, the cultural structures of public work become encrypted as masculine enterprises, whereas the private—that is, the family—become the preserve of women. Therefore, the final implication for conceptualizing Black feminism's impact on the family and the Black male is deeply rooted in a paradigm which itself is problematic.

Fourth-wave feminism has ushered in the #MeToo movement, but little has changed between Black men and women in regard to Black women feeling safe enough to come forward with their claims of sexual abuse by Black male perpetrators. Tarana Burke, the founder of the "MeToo" movement, acknowledges that the movement has resulted in very little change for the Black community. She stated, "The world was changing but [Black

women] weren't being swept up in those changes." Indeed, years before Anita Hill testified before Congress regarding the sexual harassment she endured while working under U.S. Supreme Court nominee, Clarence Thomas, racial trauma inhibited Black women from saying "me too."

Criminalization and public shaming of the offender are the main methods of redress in #MeToo; this is an already well-known problem that Black men face. The previous accounts of Black men having been lynched due to baseless claims that they raped white women are all too familiar. It is also common knowledge that large numbers of Black men are unjustly imprisoned. With #MeToo, due process has shifted—women's accusations are more readily believed than those of the supposed perpetrator—is also a common dilemma in Black communities. Thus, Black women are reluctant to hand Black men over to a criminal justice system that has been biased against Black men.

In Black culture, there is a communal sense of being; the welfare of the group is more important than the individual. For example, in Anita Hill's 1991 testimony, the unfair expectations the Black community insists that Black women adhere to was highlighted. Hill was expected to safeguard the Black man (Clarence Thomas) in order to help maintain a Black presence on the Supreme Court and assist in bolstering the Black community by remaining silent. Subsequently, there were Black people who labeled Hill a race traitor for revealing the abuse. Burke explains:

> Black women's need and…duty that we feel to protect Black men is definitely a hindrance to protecting ourselves. There's this added layer in the Black community that we have to contend with of like, "Oh you're gonna put this before race…You let this thing happen to you. Now, we have to pay for it as a race?" And then we're silenced even more.

This theory has been witnessed in the current events involving T.I., Russell Simmons, and Bill Cosby, all having been subject to decades long allegations of sexual abuse by multiple accusers with impunity. However, R. Kelly has been the most recent Black celebrity to face sexual abuse charges in the wake of #MeToo.

In 2008, a jury found R. Kelly not guilty of child pornography stemming from a 2002 video that allegedly featured him having sex with a teenage girl. The acquittal was inevitable as the alleged victim refused to cooperate with the prosecution and testify against the R&B crooner. In 2019, "Surviving R. Kelly," a Lifetime documentary, aired and chronicled accusations of abuse from numerous women. This documentary led to the public taking a closer look at the inappropriate relationships R. Kelly has had with teenagers. Now, the Grammy-winner who has collaborated with artists such as Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, Jay-Z, and Lady Gaga, is facing new allegations of sexual misconduct.

Prosecutors stated the recent charges were filed on behalf of four accusers, three of whom were between thirteen and seventeen when the singer allegedly abused them. The singer, also known as the Pied Piper, was indicted for racketeering based on the sexual abuse of minors, kidnapping and forced labor, along with eight charges of violation of the Mann Act, which bans transporting any person across state lines for the purpose of prostitution. A total of 45 witnesses testified against him, including two men and nine women who described decades of sexual and physical abuse. Several witnesses testified about R. Kelly's relationship with the late singer, Aaliyah, who met Kelly when she was 12 years old. Testimony revealed Kelly began having sex with Aaliyah soon after they met. Witnesses testified that he also illegally married her in 1994; at the time, Aaliyah was 15, and Kelly was 27.

The possible take-down of prominent men in the Black community is a start, but Black women as a whole are still suffering. According to Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, the movement can't remain "a problem of the beautiful, the wealthy, the popular…we need to be able to make sure that a broader group of women are introduced into the public consciousness." Burke also believes that intersectional feminism is needed:

> What history has shown us time and again is that if marginalized voices… aren't centered in our movements, then they tend to become no more than a footnote… Ending sexual violence [and harassment] will require every voice from every corner of the world and it will require those whose voices are most often heard to find ways to amplify those voices that often go unheard.

Just as Black women created their own safe spaces by forming clubs and societies separate from popular feminism and the Black Panther movements, organizations that focus on the needs of women are now coming together to help Black women who experience sexual abuse. A new initiative, "We, As Ourselves," is a national campaign that has been developed to specifically target Black survivors of sexual abuse. The initiative is the result of a partnership between "Me Too" International, the Time's Up Foundation, and the National Women's Law Center. Per their released statement, their goal is to ensure that Black survivors have safe spaces; to challenge narratives that silence and damage Black survivors; and to create new methods that will help Black survivors be "believed, heard, and supported." The initiative is welcomed as it is time that the focus turns to Black women so they can speak openly about the sexual abuse they experience from Black male perpetrators.

Using silence as a coping mechanism originated during the days of chattel slavery; by remaining silent, Black women and girls were able to detach themselves from the psychological and emotional burden of abuse. Nonetheless, remaining silent when abuse occurs in order to protect male perpetrators in the Black community is ultimately

damaging to Black women and girls. The Black community makes Black women who have been sexually abused feel that there are more significant problems that need to receive attention. From the days of slavery, to Jim Crow, to the Civil Rights era, to current day, Black women have been inherently protective of Black men because they are aware of the struggle Black men face. However, if the Black community continues to be dismissive about sexual abuse against women and never faces this pervasive problem, then Black people will never have the opportunity to heal from the experiences endured throughout history.

Collaboratively Written By: Kimberly Bouyer, Sara Thompson, Tyree Watkins
See Page 22-23 for Sources.

Fall On a Budget

By: Brookes Washington

Ladies, Summer is out, and Fall is in, and you know Social Coffee has got your back! Whether you're going on a cute coffee date or having a lovely walk in the park. Here is the look for you. Something chic, something sexy, but most importantly, something affordable!

PRETTY LITTLE THINGS:
ADELAIDA BLUSH OFF SHOULDER KNITTED CROP SWEATER $14
BROWN PLEATED SIDE SPLIT TENNIS SKIRT $17
TAUPE PATENT CHELSEA CHUNKY SOLE ANKLE BOOTS $53

#MeToo and the Perception of Popular Romance

By: Monica Ingle

With the introduction of the #MeToo movement, many aspects of the romance dynamic, at least in this present day and time, have changed. The #MeToo movement was created as a way of "effecting social change, utilizing social media, to combat sexual abuse, harassment, and other heinous sexual crimes" (metoomvmnt.org). Within the confines of the #MeToo movement women are encouraged to come forward and face their abuser with power and dignity allowing for them to have a say in what happens to their bodies. While fighting for women's equality and inclusion, many powerful entities have been taken down in the process. However, as innocent as this movement may sound, as righteous as it may have started out, how many of the claims made during this movement have been substantiated? Now, do not get it twisted, this movement has potential to be, and is, exceptionally influential in getting women the fairness we deserve.

There is a minute difference between equality and fairness, and to understand that difference, we must first accept that we are all biologically and genetically different. We are biologically built differently, but those differences are what make us humans unique, and though those differences are what often pull us apart, we all still deserve to be treated with the same respect as would any cis-white man. Let's be honest, saying that one wants equality, by definition, means "the state of being equal, especially in status, rights, and opportunities" (dictionary.com); while fairness is "impartial and just treatment or behavior without favoritism or discrimination" (dictionary.com). One cannot exist without the other, but how does this particular movement pertain to our perception of popular romance?

To answer the above question, we must first examine the status of accusing someone of such a heinous crime, them being punished, and that crime not being real. What happens to those who falsely accuse someone of heinous sexual acts and ruins their life? Picture this. In 1975, Wayman Cammile Jr. was found by authorities drunk in a young woman's bed. When questioned, Alice Mock accused Cammile Jr. of forceful break-in and rape. Prior arrests of Cammile Jr. played a part of his guilty verdict and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. On her death bed, eleven years after Jr's conviction, Mock confessed to lying about the rape. More than a decade in prison, Wayman Cammile Jr. walked free. What happened to her? Nothing.She ruined this man's life for what?

In retaliation to the possibility to false accusations, this has created a movement called the #HimToo movement; which focuses of the male victims of rape and strives to help the victims of false accusations get their lives back on track. This movement was created in 2018 by a mother who was saddened to hear that her son was scared to date because of the false accusations of rape. When researching the statistics of #MeToo false accusations it came out that 1 in 428 cases were proved to be false. That is still 427 that are true, viable, and substantiated claims with their attacker behind bars, but what about that one that did nothing to deserve being accused of such a heinous act. Breaking up with a girl, refusing a date, maybe even something as little as talking to them ended in a mountain of legal fees, court appearances, interviews, nights spent in jail, his world turned upside down because of a false accusation that will come up on any background check for the rest of his life. He will have to explain and relive that occurrence for the rest of his life as if he were actually guilty and not innocent. What can we, collectively as a people do for those that are falsely accused or those who have been silenced and not trusted or believed? #MeToo is all about equality, right? So, shouldn't there be consequences for those who spread false accusations? Would that not be equal and fair? What should the punishment be, what about restitution for legal fees? What about the boy that had everything taken from him, even going to college over a false accusation, where is his restitution? Even one false accusation is one too many. Too many lives have been ruined by false accusations in one way or another. Too many lives and reputations have been ruined from not being believed, lets stand up for those who have their life ruined and being told their not credible enough. Let it end with our generation.

Creative

Original Works of Fiction Inspiried by Each Issues Focus

When God Was A Woman

By: Emily Waller

Wild hair and a warmth in her skin
She feels heady and decadent.
As she runs through the earth
She defines femininity, no matter the meaning.

For that is what she always is...

For me a fierce spirit and clearness of mind
For you a sexiness and confidence for days
For her a nurturing hand and the beauty in softness
For them a quick resilience and steady compassion

She was Feminine, but
She seems to be lost

No, not lost
Driven away

Driven away by the demand for one thing,
For how could she be all things?
He simply does not understand
How what he does can be feminine too

How uncomfortable we must be
With femininity, to remove her from our god.
Lost to the world and reduced to one ideal
Image, only so to be better understood.

Do not let a man define your Feminine
For she is yours alone.
Let her be all things
As women are all things in communion with their souls.

a mouse no more

By: Tori Manning

Words covered. Actions hidden. Consequences shaken.
Shaken, not stirred. Never a peep in the silence,
never a voice from a mouse. Just snapped out of
Existence.

Words covered. Actions hidden. Consequences shaken.
Victims of crimes become criminals.
Criminals becoming victims. Ruined lives, snapped out of
Existence.

Words covered. Actions hidden. Consequences shaken.

Words covered. Actions hidden.

Words covered.

STOP!

Voices silent, disappearing into the dark,
darkness that echoes sins covered up for centuries,
sins and greed and money and sex and, and, and
all consumed by those who thought they had the
Right.

The right to our bodies.
The right to take what is not theirs,
hands snatching breasts, clawing hips, bruising thighs,
tearing into our flesh, poisoning our minds,
destroying our self-worth, grinding it until it is nothing,
making us less than human, just trophies, a prize to be won,
over and over and over and over.
The right to silence our cries. To silence our truths;

spoken from lips bruised and bloodied for so long,
spoken from lips plumped and perfect for so long,
spoke from lips cursed and hated for so long,
spoken from lips smiling bright at cameras for so long,
spoken from lips too young and scared for so long,
spoken from lips that were silenced for so long,
spoken from lips that were afraid for so long.

(cont next page)

STOP!

Words covered. Actions hidden. Consequences shaken.
Victims of crimes become criminals.
Criminals becoming victims.

STOP!

Too long have our words been covered in darkness.
Too long have actions taken, pressed upon as a right,
been hidden.

Stop.

No longer will the mouse sit quietly in the corner.
No longer will the cries of women,
fierce and beautiful and feminine and graceful and
tenacious and resilient and passionate and confident and
intelligent and loving and fragile and unconventional and, and, and
Be hidden from the world.

Words hidden will be given air to breathe.
Actions covered will be unearthed in light for all to witness.
Consequences shaken will be taken back, stronger than ever.

For no longer,
will the mouse sit quietly in the corner;
Waiting for a trap.

Stop.

“Much Ado About Pizza”

By: Keyoka Kinzy

I only feel love when I’m underneath somebody. Skin pressing down on me, fingers grasping at my flesh. Eyes that see me, lips that tell me I’m beautiful. Shawn’s lips are a reverence to my body. We move to the throb of his heartbeat, and I find myself beneath him because I know he’s a guaranteed good lay. But sex never lasts long enough – no matter how long it lasts. Neither does the wine or the sugar. Neither does keeping my mind busy during the day. Dancing around my apartment. If you thought moving your legs could stop your brain from pushing through with thoughts, let me tell you, that ain’t it. No matter what I do; I still find myself up under him, and damn, he’s warm for however long he’s there.

Always too soon, right after we’re done touching, I look at myself in the mirror and the inspection begins. My eyes are as attentive as his fingers once were. Look at me. Is this beautiful?

He’s my boyfriend, so he doesn’t leave right after, that comes later. Instead, he leans against the bathroom door frame and pulls me closer to him. He buries his face in my dented fro and his fingers start to wander again.

Afterward, we’re outstretched on my bed. The sheets are tangled, and our legs are tangled. I’m cold, staring up at the ceiling fan, but too tired to move. Then, just before the arms of sleep wrap around me, I say, “I’m hungry.” No response.

“I’m hungry,” I tell him, dragging out the vowel in ‘hungry’ for added emphasis.

He opens one eye and shakes his head. “No rest in this house,” Shawn says, but gets up anyway. “All that work I put in and you’re still not happy?” he asks, playfully. He pulls on his pants, and I avert my eyes, then force myself to look.

“Pizza?”

He scoffs. “You always want pizza. Where from?”

“Dominos.” I’ve already started ordering.

“You gonna ride?”

Do I have to?” I ask him, rolling onto my belly, crossing my arms under my chin.

His smile is a beacon in the darkness of my room. “If you want pizza.”

I throw on some sweats. He wants to take my car, so I make him drive.

It’s raining. Sex is so much better when it’s raining. Not when it sweats against your clothes in the Louisiana summer. The rain makes me feel heavy, sad, trapped underwater. As soon as I locked my apartment door, I wanted to get back in bed and sleep. I clung to Shawn, who made a show of opening the door for me before getting in on his side. I kissed his cheek and wrapped as much of myself as I can onto his right arm as he drove.

The line is too long. Cars spill out onto the street, creating a commotion of blinking lights and honking horns as he navigates getting around the line. Shawn parks in an adjacent parking lot, secures his hoodie, and runs for the door. He tries it, says something to someone inside, then runs back to me. He’s soaking wet, pissed off. I reach for him, and he shrugs me off.

“They closed the inside; said we have to go through the drive-thru. Did you already pay?” I shook my head. “We’re going to Pizza Hut,” he concludes.

“Maybe we can just wait in line,” I say, something rising in my chest. All of a sudden, my body feels like stone.

“Nah, look at that line,” says Shawn. “Nobody’s at Pizza Hut.” He reverses my car and books it across the street. “Come on,” he says once he parks.

“I think I’ll stay in the car,” I tell him. The weight of my head has forced me to press my hair against the window.

He just looks at me. “You won’t even come inside with me?”

"I just don't feel like it."

"Do you think I felt like getting up in the middle of the night in the rain to drive all the way here –"

"Okay, Shawn, okay."

"It's like I work for you or something. 'Fuck me, Shawn. Feed me, Shawn.' Anything else, Princess Shequanda?"

"I said O-KAY, Shawn."

I never care about my fro getting wet, but it's inconvenient and annoying. Like this night. Each step requires cajoling. Move, Keyshia. Breathe, Keyshia. Shawn holds the door open for me.

An uninterested woman, a few years older than me, leans forward on the counter. When she sees us, she straightens, her face brightens with a smile.

"What can I get y'all?" she asks.

I often study the way women look at him. Shawn is of average height, dark-skinned, a small gut, hips a tad too wide for a man. His face could be handsome sometimes, but rodent-like others. His beard is always managed in a straight line that slices his face in half. The hair is mostly black with a few grays poking out. His eyes are nondescript. I've looked inside of them many times trying to see myself and I couldn't. He speaks loudly and to everyone all the time, even when there is only us and the other woman in the room.

"I'm letting her decide," he says. "You know how you girls are." And he presents well. He's not wealthy, but he's stable. He has "safe" written all

over him. Other women can see this. They survey him and then, their eyes find me. I recognize this as the time for me to say something, participate in the casual banter they've created, and I cannot. I try to smile politely, but I'm sure it's anything but. I stare at the menus plastered on the counter, on screens behind the woman. She and Shawn are talking, but I can't hear anything over my thoughts.

My mother calls Shawn "Pus Head." She's never met him, and she calls him "Pus Head." According to my mother, Shawn is a man whose head has ballooned with bullshit, just waiting to pop. Men like that, when they pop, the goop gets everywhere. It infects you, your home, and it's too hard to clean it off. Damn, am I walking around with a pus head-looking ass nigga? "Besides, he's too old for you, Key," she says every time I mention him or ask her to meet him.

Eleven years. Just 11 and I'm not a child. But I know he likes when people see us together. Folks mistake me for his daughter, though we look nothing alike. He has started to touch me in public, especially in front of men. He'll wrap his arms around me and kiss my neck, bury his forehead in the bridge of my shoulders, grope my breasts quickly.

In this Pizza Hut, I can feel my parts fragmenting – my mind out of my body, my soul hovering above; I can't feel my fingers. His public touch usually makes me uncomfortable, awkward, but I want his palms to ground me. I look up at him. His body is leaning against the counter towards the woman. He's too far for me to reach out and touch him.

"What's taking you so long?" he asks. "Want to order the whole menu?" The woman laughs. They're both staring at me now. I feel like a child just that quickly.

"Uh…pizza," I blurt. Shawn makes a face and gestures for me to continue. "Cheese."

“No toppings?” she asks. “Kinda boring, don’tcha think?”

There are thousands of tiny needles prickling my skin. The palms of my hands are hot and moist.

“Thank you,” I say and leave Shawn at the counter. I find the chair closest to the door.

“What’s your problem?” he hisses from the seat beside me.

“I don’t have a problem,” I answer.

“No, you’re definitely acting funny. What’s wrong with you?”

“I just get anxious sometimes.”

“So, you act rude to me?”

“How was I rude?” He makes a face. “Well, I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just a lot. When I get anxious, it’s hard to be around people. Then, when things don’t go the way I think they’re going to go, I just get so uncomfortable.”

“But why do you have to take it out on me?”

“I wasn’t trying to. I wanted to stay in the car.”

“So, it’s my fault?” he asks.

“This isn’t about you.”

“Yeah, ‘cause it’s always about you.”

"Your food is ready," the woman at the counter says. Shawn moves to collect it and I wait for him. He says something that makes the woman laugh and brushes past me to the car.

"Fuckin' child," he says just loud enough for me to hear.

We ride home silently – him navigating the slick city streets, me with my head pressed against the car window.

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