

"Inspiring to a new generation of young, talented girls."
—Vanessa Williams
recording artist and actress

Like Vanessa

Tami Charles



"Gritty, poetic, and emotionally true" —Rita Williams-Garcia
author of *One Crazy Summer*



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“Closed mouths don’t get fed.”

—Marie “Nana” Carlisle (circa 1986)

Dearest Grandmother,

I didn’t understand it then, but I get it now.

Rest easy,

Mik-Mik



September 17, 1983



America

All them lights, bathing her white, washing away
the slightest trace.

Miss America they call her, smile so bright,
eyes shut tight, brand-new day.

Everybody talking 'bout history'll be made;
we'll win the race.

Really? I say, 'cause if it were me,
would they feel the same way?

In the land of the free, home of the brave,
we'll bust up that long-shut door.

Course it'll be a light-and-bright,
two-shades-from-white,

least—America ain't the America we know from before . . .

Dear Darlene,

Miss America's coming on tonight. You ready?

—Nessy

Fifty Stinkin' Years



Pop Pop gave me my very first “Darlene” eight years ago and a brand-new one every year after that—custom-made of pressed, dried wildflowers spanning every color of the rainbow. Most kids my age would call Darlene a diary, but she’s much more than a place to write stupid lists of the cutest guys in eighth grade. Darlene’s my chill spot: a place to share the lyrics in my head, the words crawling through my bones, the latest gossip running through Grafton Hill. Today’s hot topic? Miss America.

Pop Pop and I got a bet going for this year. Miss America’s never crowned a black girl . . . *ever*. And that pageant’s been going on every year since 1933! Way I see it, the powers that be have no plans whatsoever to pick a girl who looks like me. Let Pop Pop tell you: everything’s gonna change this year.

Watching Miss America is our little tradition. Each of us eyeing the screen, clutching onto a memory long gone. His memory is of time with his daughter, my mother. Honey-eyed, vanilla-coated, lullaby-singing angel. Him pretending that on this very day, every year, he could have a piece of his little girl back through me. And me watching alongside Pop

Pop. My memory: pushing, hoping, forcing myself to remember her. To remember what having a mother feels like. To, even for a second, drown myself in her beauty even though I don't look a thing like her.

I pull out the hot comb, pomade, and all my favorite hair bows. Pop Pop lets me straighten and braid his hair while he nurses a coffee cup of whiskey. Me pretending I'm the one getting my hair done, and Mama's doing it. Pop Pop pretending the whiskey's a cure-all. A magic potion in all of its bitter-sweetness, helping him remember too.

The hot comb glides through with ease. My grandfather has some silky, long, curly hair. Says he gets it from his Cherokee side. That Cherokee blood must have skipped over me.

Halfway through the show, two black women make it to the top ten: Miss New York, Vanessa Williams, and Miss New Jersey, Suzette Charles. They're both so beautiful—black, the light-skinned and curly-haired type like Pop Pop and Mama. Maybe they got some Cherokee in them too.

“This is it, Nussy!” Pop Pop says before they start to announce the top five. “This is our year. Get on in here, TJ, we 'bout to make history!”

My cousin TJ comes running into the living room, feather boa in one hand, pen and sketch pad in the other. He wraps the boa around my neck, saying, “Here you go, Miss America!” Then he plops down on the couch and starts drawing pageant gowns like mad.

On the fuzzy black-and-white screen, Gary Collins starts announcing the runners-up. And just as Pop Pop predicts,

this is the year black women make history at the Miss America pageant. Because not one but *two* of us are standing there, waiting to be announced as the new winner. My fists clench with the strength of an army ten thousand strong, hopes flying sky-high, anxiety drowning in my chest. Would the Miss America pageant even let a black girl win? Give girls like me the tiniest piece of hope that, yes, black is beautiful? Even if it means that they'd start with the light-and-bright, two-shades-from-white kind? Because if so, then that means that one day girls like me—the darkest of black—could be seen as pretty too.

Suzette Charles takes the first runner-up spot. And at this point, I'm thinking, *Okay, we came close enough. We ain't gonna see a day like this for probably another fifty years.*

"And your new Miss America is . . . Vanessa Williams!" Gary Collins shouts into the microphone.

And I swear I just about lose my mind!

The spotlights lower onto Vanessa's bad-to-the-bone, silver-and-white, one-shouldered gown. The audience thunders with applause. After the crown is placed on her head, she takes her ceremonial walk down the runway. And she's working it too. Hips swaying. Teeth all shining. And she's got that Miss America wave down pat. I stare at the screen. Stare real long and hard. Vanessa Williams's face fades away, and Mama's sets in. I mean, really, they could be twins.

It's like Mama can see me through that television. Right through me. And the way she's looking, it's like she's making a promise. She'll come back some day. When things are right.

When all the broken pieces are mended back together. We'll go back to the time when we were us—the Martins—minus the booze, minus the stares, minus the whispers.

These days, you might as well call us the left behinds. We're the ones that were left behind the day Mama walked out all those years ago. That was when everything changed: the rest of the family forgot about us, Pop Pop turned to booze, Daddy's spirit up and died, and we moved to the projects of Grafton Hill. Daddy walked into that empty bedroom of his, soul black as night, and locked his door. And I ain't seen the inside of that room or his heart ever since. Only comes out to go to work, which can be anytime, day or night.

Things will get better again. Mama's voice whispers through the television, sweet like honeydew in summer. A shiver courses through the arch of my back.

I'm soaking in Mama (well, Vanessa) through that screen, as if she sees me, the real me. It's like I know I gotta do something to make everything right. For everybody. All I gotta do is find Mama. But how?

I'm sitting on our brown shag carpet, boohooing like a dang fool, clutching onto Darlene, shoulders shaking worse than an earthquake. My prayers turn to words that I hold on to, fighting to remember, so me and Darlene can talk about it later.

Next thing I know, I'm up off that floor, wiping away my tears, jumping up and down and clapping my hands. I'm clapping for Vanessa, clapping for Mama, clapping for me. All the years I've watched this pageant and not once did I see a

black girl win. Nobody ever did. Not before tonight. I know I'm never gonna forget this. I start prancing around the room, doing the Miss America wave. Close my eyes real tight-like. Picture that Miss America crown on Mama's head. Picture it on mine too. Picture Daddy smiling again, wrapping his big old earthy hands around Mama's tiny little waist, like he used to do.

Pop Pop pulls me close to his chest, his liquor-laden scent stinging my nose. "That's gonna be you one day, Nessy. Your singing is just as good as Vanessa Williams's. And Miss America's even got the same name as you. It's meant to be, baby girl!"

"Yeah, and when you do make it to Miss America, you already know who's doing all of your styling! I won't even charge you full price!" TJ jokes.

And in that moment I believe what they say could be true for me. That I could be like Vanessa Williams. Long as it doesn't take no fifty stinkin' years. 'Cause I'm not sure me and Mama got that kind of time on our hands.

September 19, 1983



Unpretty

The world ain't so pretty
if there are no flowers,
no seeds to bear,
no sun to cast out the darkness,
no soil to fill it with promises,
to remind us
that like wings,
hope can take flight,
even among all things unpretty.

Dear Darlene,

I love that part in *The Bluest Eye* that talks about the soil being bad for certain types of flowers. Pecola thinks that's why the seeds won't grow in her town, among the garbage. That maybe it's just too late. You think Toni Morrison's ever been to Newark? 'Cause there ain't nothing but garbage here too. Garbage on the streets. In those needles the dopeheads drop in the alleys. In the elevators that carry me to the eighth floor of my apartment in Grafton Hill. Except there ain't no flowers in my 'hood. Just that fake, plastic, general-store-looking sunflower Pop Pop puts on the windowsill. Trying to pretend like our crib is some penthouse out in Beverly Hills. But everybody knows you can cover up caca with perfume, but after a while it's still gonna stink.

—Nessy

Not Even Daddy Calls Me That



It's sixth-period chorus, and as usual I'm not the only one ignoring the teacher. The scattered noises of gossip and hip-hop rhymes battle it out against the melody Mrs. Walton's playing on the piano.

Eighth graders: 35; Mrs. Walton: 0.

My seat is in the back of our dungeon-like music room, behind the chaos, behind Tanisha, who's lost herself in her sketch pad. I sink into my chair, placing *The Bluest Eye* on top of Darlene, and reach for my next read, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Pop Pop says he got it special for me because I'm his little songbird. I turn to the first page, ready to lose myself in the words. Ready to pretend I'm anywhere but here.

Mrs. Walton stops playing the piano, and suddenly I feel a pair of icy eyes hawking me. "Vanessa Martin, school's been in session for three weeks now. You think you want to join us sometime soon?"

Tension tiptoes up my spine. I sit up straight like I've been listening all along, which is a bald-faced lie. But of all the people in the room, she chooses to call on me?

Everyone turns and looks at me like, *What you gonna do*

now? Even Tanisha's staring me down, begging me to say something. Anything.

My lips turn to salt and start to quiver at the thought of being stared at. 'Cause even one second of attention is a second too long.

Everybody's got their rep in eighth grade. Mine? I'm like oxygen—you know I'm there, but you don't see me. I shut my mouth. I make good grades. And when the bell rings at the end of the day, I take my butt home, close my door, and dream of a place far, far away from here.

"Guidance made me take this class. Singing just ain't my thing." My voice is a loud whisper. It's enough to produce a few *oohs*. And once that starts, I know the teacher will have a point to prove.

Mrs. Walton slowly struts to my desk. The click-clacking of her heels echoes through the room. Her tiny frame grows larger as she walks toward me, looking like she's ready to start something. She's new to King Middle. Probably never taught a single black kid in her life. And like most white teachers they send here, she won't last the full school year. Especially once Junito Mendez orders the Latin Diablos to break into her car. That's tradition for every new teacher—black or white.

Mrs. Walton'll be here and gone within a season. Here to feed us with possibility. Blinded by her hope to make a difference. And before the school year ends, she'll bounce. But I'm used to that. I give her till Christmas.

"Tell me," she says, checking out the books that I've done a poor job of hiding. "What do you want to do with your life?"

My eyes rise up to the ceiling and stay there, glued to the dried-up wet-tissue bombs hanging on for dear life.

Lady, I don't feel like hearing one of those save-our-black-youth speeches. That's what I want to say to her, but I know that sass talk'll get me sent to the principal's office. And the last thing I need is Daddy coming up in here. Me and him got enough problems.

I hesitate before I speak, trying to think of what she'd want to hear come outta my mouth. Say I wanna end world hunger or find world peace. Teachers like that kind of talk. Plus, it seems like a safe enough answer to make her leave me alone until the bell rings. And then no one would have to know the real me I want to be.

"Nessy wants to be Miss America one day," spills out of Tanisha's mouth before I have a chance to lie. "And she can sing."

And suddenly I feel naked. Like straight-up covered in layers upon layers of fat and the whole class is looking at me like a tub of lard, naked.

Tanisha turns around and flashes me a cheesy smile, like she done said something good. My lips turn upward in a weak smile, but what I really want to do is smack her one good time upside the head.

Sometimes I think Tanisha ain't too bright upstairs. 'Cause if she were, she would remember that my Miss America dreams are private, for no one else to know about and make fun of . . . especially Curtis Dumont.

"Miss America? *Yeah, right!*" Curtis yells, with a toothy grin. Of course, all his homeboys laugh. I knew that was coming.

“Maaaaan, please! *Real* black people don’t win Miss America! That’s for them high-yellow girls and white girls with light hair, light eyes, and little bodies,” he shouts. “And last time I checked, yo’ tar-baby self ain’t got none of that!”

Curtis got a lot of nerve with his busted-behind teeth. The top row is doubled—yes, doubled, as in there are two complete rows of teeth. That probably solves the mystery of the missing ones on the bottom.

“Calm down now, everyone,” Mrs. Walton squeals, but it falls on deaf ears.

Not stopping there, Curtis stands up with his fake-behind, wanna-be-gangster, rapper self and spits out a rhyme.

“Vanessa, Vanessa is wack, wack, ’cause Vanessa, Vanessa’s too black, black!”

The whole class starts dying. Bust-a-gut, hunched-over, bladder-holding laughing. My skin grows too tight for my body. It wants to split open and empty everything inside out, but I ain’t letting them see me like that. A knot the size of a baseball bulges in my throat, and here comes Tanisha, turning around, looking at me with those sad hazel eyes, mouthing, “I’m sorry.”

Now would be a good time for the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

“I’m not playing with you guys. Settle down—now!” Mrs. Walton calls out, flailing her little arms like a helpless newborn bird. But her voice barely rises over the rumblings of the other students.

“She too dark!”

“Don’t she know she too fat to be in a beauty pageant?”

“Man, that Miss America chick wasn’t really black. She was mixed or something!”

“What talent would Vanessa do for a pageant? *Read?*”

It’s like a dis-fest up in King Middle School today.

I sit at my desk, thinking about watching the pageant, anger boiling up inside me worse than a pot of collard greens on a Sunday afternoon. I might not ever make it to the Miss America stage, but it won’t be because stupid Curtis says I can’t.

I stand abruptly, my notebooks and pencils crashing to the floor. Curtis and his dumb friends laugh harder. Like a bolt of lightning slicing through the clouds, my words jolt them and leave them frozen in their seats.

“You can make fun of me all you want, but at least I got all my teeth. Looks like the top row ate the bottom row of yours!”

The class is singing, “*Daaaaaaang!*” as Curtis sits back in his chair all stupid-like, trying to come up with his next crack back. I’m standing there, towering over his scrawny little behind, wondering where this voice came from. Me, the girl who’d rather chew on her fingernails than talk in class. Me, the girl who just had her dreams put out there, only to be made fun of. Me, the girl who just shut down the class clown.

Tanisha slaps me a high five like I just won a championship basketball game. But I don’t feel like a winner at all. Flames dart out of my cheeks. My all-too-small shirt has risen up yet again, and my stomachs are spilling out of my jeans.

“You gotta have talent to be in a Miss America pageant,

you idiot. And Nesity here got a voice straight from heaven. Believe that, boy!” Tanisha is up out of her seat now too, her long arms spread wide like eagle wings.

The class responds in true chorus fashion: “Oooooooh!” And someone hollers, “She served you, son!”

The bell rings, leaving Curtis no chance to crack back. The room empties, and Tanisha waits for me as I pick my things up off the floor. My whole body hovers there longer than it should. Truth is, ain’t much left on the inside. Can’t stand up if you ain’t got no bones.

“You know, Vanessa, my daughter and I watched the pageant too. In fact, we watch it every year. A friend of mine volunteers for the Miss New Jersey pageant. She was able to get a few board members to help sponsor a pageant at King Middle this year. They’re donating the crown, banner, the works! Flyers are going up tomorrow. Maybe you’ll consider trying out?”

I rise up to see a much different face. The crunched folds around Mrs. Walton’s eyebrows have softened.

Oh, now you want to be nice to me. Now that the circus act is over?

I could imagine Mrs. Walton glued to the television—for sure it’s a colored one and probably big too.

“Humph.” I shrug my shoulders, looking down at her. In this moment I’m painfully reminded of how big I am for my age.

“And I think you’re right, Vanessa. You can absolutely go for Miss America in a few years, and why not? You’re pretty

and smart. Would be nice to actually hear you sing, instead of watching you hide behind a book. This is chorus, after all.”

My cheeks grow warm again, and somewhere deep beneath the layers of black skin, I can feel them blush pink.

“Mrs. Walton,” Tanisha interrupts, “Nessy sings in the church choir. You should come one—”

I poke her in the ribs. The last person I’d invite to church is Mrs. Walton. I could just see her sitting among all them black folks catching the Holy Ghost in the pews around her. That woman would stick out like a baby lamb in a field of lions.

“Don’t listen to Tanisha.” And with that, I grab my big-mouthed friend and drag her to next period.

I know Mrs. Walton’s faking it anyway with all that talk. It’s part of her job. To make girls like me feel like they could be somebody. To pretend like she’s my friend when the truth is she’d probably dead-bolt her doors if I rang the bell to sell Girl Scout cookies. But still, she did ask me to be in the pageant. And she did call me pretty. As in lovely. As in gorgeous. Not even Daddy calls me that.

This Part of Town



The Sugarhill Gang is blasting on the corner as Tanisha and I walk home after school. Pop Pop says this rap stuff ain't nothing but the devil's music. But I kinda dig it. It's like the poetry Darlene and I share—like air and thunder rumbling and waves crashing, huddled together ready for combat, each one hoping to be the winner. Tanisha's dancing with the beat. She getting down too. Popping and gyrating her little body in ways that would get me slapped. Daddy would have my hide if he saw me dancing like that in public. I could hear him now: "That's how I lost yo' mama!" I still have no idea what he means. He never talks about her. Doesn't really let anybody else, for that matter, especially Pop Pop. And she's Pop Pop's own daughter.

Grafton Ave. turns into an open-air theater once the dismissal bell rings. To the left there's Raheem with his boom box balanced on his shoulder. He's rapping along with the Sugarhill Gang while his homeboys break-dance on pieces of cardboard. They're spinning on top of their heads and twisting their bodies in all kind of ways. To the right the *boricuas* are blasting that salsa music. Beats so fast, your hips

would fall off if you even tried to move to it. But somehow they make it look so good. Héctor Lavoe's "Mi Gente" comes on the radio. And the *boricuas* go wild when the trumpet starts. "Ay, this brings me right back to Puerto Rico!" I hear Mrs. Mendez cry out. She owns the bodega on the corner and is the mother of the most popular girl at King Middle, Beatriz Mendez, and Grafton's number one gangbanger, Junito "El Diablo" Mendez. Mrs. Mendez is always dressed to the nines, and every guy in the neighborhood gets all spit-mouthed when they see her.

The two drastically different music styles fight to the last note. And in the mix of it all, the people of my 'hood are hustling. Hustling to catch the bus downtown to pick up a fresh new pair of Adidas. Hustling to get to their jobs. Seems like everybody who does have a job works at the auto-parts factory on the corner of Broad and Market. That's where Daddy makes cars for other people while he can't even afford one for himself. And some folks just plain hustle. Hustle anything. Dope. Reefer. Whatever it takes to pay the bills.

Once we pass the bodega, Grandmaster Flash pours in through the speakers. The lyrics to his song "The Message" are so true. Where I live is a real live jungle. Full of wildness. In the people. In the land. In the air. And I often wonder if I'll ever get outta here. Escape the drugs and the dark cloud that hovers over Grafton. Break free of the skin-seeping smell of people who are more than happy to be trapped here. Maybe go live someplace where there are real sunflowers and the kind of real sunshine that Toni Morrison talks about.

“That’s my song, girl!” Tanisha screams, and she breaks out into a pop and lock when the second verse comes on. She tickles me in my ribs, and I can’t help but laugh.

The boys on the corner look at her with needy eyes. None of them look at me like that.

“Come on, Nussy, you know you want to dance! I hope you ain’t still tripping over what that fool Curtis said. Are you mad at me for saying the stuff about Miss America?”

“Man, forget Curtis.” I smile weakly, adding to my lie. “And no, it’s cool. I ain’t mad.”

On the outside, my game face is serious. Like unbroken concrete. But on the inside, I got a case of twinges in my heart and waves in the deepest pit of my stomach. When Tanisha walks through the door of her apartment, her mother will be there waiting for her. Waiting to hear about her day at school.

In a perfect world, I’d have a mom to talk to. I’d run inside my building, past the pissy-smelling elevator, and dart up to the eighth floor. I’d swing open the door, huffing and puffing, and yell, “Mama! You wouldn’t believe what Curtis said today in chorus!” And while I’m telling her the story, I’m popping my neck and snapping my fingers. Mama would throw in a few “Oh no, he didn’t!” lines. She’d give me a few crack backs for the next time I faced his braided-teeth self, and I’d be ready for him!

We’d laugh and slap high fives like we been homegirls forever. Then she’d make my favorite dinner: fried chicken, cornbread with honey, macaroni and cheese (with five different cheeses because *all* real moms know how to make it like that),

and collard greens to top it off. After dinner I'd help her wash the dishes. She'd listen to my poetry, and we'd paint each other's nails and watch *Jeopardy!* before going to bed. She would tuck me in and kiss my forehead. She'd crack my window so I could feel the crisp Newark air. I'd drift off into a deep sleep under the hypnotizing spell of rap beats and tropical salsa rhythms.

But that world's not real. This one is. The world where I part ways with Tanisha before the sun goes down in Newark. Because we both know the freaks come out at night. Tanisha makes her way to the D building, at the bottom of the hill of the projects, where she has a mom and a dad waiting for her. And I turn a sharp left down the dank alley toward the A building, alone.

And instead of giving myself a heart attack by running up all those stairs, I force myself into the pissy-stanking elevator, where Da'Quan the Dope Fiend is in the corner, having a conversation with his imaginary friend. The elevator moves like molasses, chug-a-lugging its way to the eighth floor. I walk in the house to see Pop Pop passed out on the couch, his empty whiskey cup tipped over on the floor, a newspaper at his feet, and the Bible propped up on his chest. It's funny how drunks and druggies can be the smartest, most religious people you'll ever know. Pop Pop's good leg is propped up on the couch, while his World War II one dangles off the edge. His prosthetic is on the floor, a reminder of all he lost while he fought in what he calls "the white man's war to conquer the world."

The news is playing. Even with fall technically here, we're in for a hot one tomorrow. Temperatures will be in the mid-seventies. In the background I hear TJ in his room, humming some Patti LaBelle. That boy knows he can hit those high notes. Sometimes I wonder what he's dreaming about when he's singing behind those closed doors. Is he dreaming about his daddy? The one who never stayed around long enough to even give him his last name? Is he missing his mama too? The one who moved down South last year with no explanation? Just left a prayerful note to my father, begging him to take care of TJ. Help him grow into the type of man the family can be proud of.

I walk past Daddy's always-locked bedroom door, where it seems he seals away love and good memories, and into my own room filled with posters and newspaper clippings of Vanessa Williams, taped from wall to wall. Behind my closed door, I stare at an image of the type of beauty I long to be. Vanessa and Mama look one and the same. Honey-dipped. Vanilla-coated. Perfect in every way.

I sink into my bed and pull out *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Sometimes I wish I could read with my eyes closed. Maya Angelou's words almost fly off the page and into my mind. Her own caged bird sings a song, written in the key of fear. But still, in the midst of the unknown, she has hopes and dreams. Like me.

I long for things. Lots of things. Like for Daddy to walk into my room right now with a smile and an embrace. I long for him to do the things that normal dads do. Take me

shopping. Go for walks in Branch Brook Park. Stop and play a game of Uno underneath the cherry blossom trees.

Outside my window, the moon shines in the distance. It's starting to rise as the sun makes its way to some other part of the world to bring smiles onto other people's faces. And even though I know it will return again, I can't help but wonder if the sun will ever truly shine on this part of town.

September 22, 1983



This Dang Flyer

***Audition for the First Annual
Miss King Middle School Pageant!***

WHEN: Friday, September 30, 1983

TIME: 3 P.M.

LOCATION: King Middle School auditorium

WHAT TO BRING: A pair of heels to model in;
a two-minute talent to perform

OVERVIEW: Twelve finalists will be selected.


*Finalists will participate in after-school rehearsals leading up
to our final pageant on Saturday, December 10, 1983.*

*Segments of competition include talent, formal wear,
onstage interview, and academic achievement.*

Each segment is worth 25%.

PRIZES: Crown, banner, trophy, and \$250 ca\$h award

And That's That

 Mrs. Walton's been posting these doggone flyers everywhere in the school. Bright yellow, hawking me in the cafeteria, the hallways, even the locker rooms. I can't even get dressed for gym without these dang flyers breathing down my neck. Part of me wants to dare myself to take a chance. The other part runs screaming worse than a four-year-old begging her mama to chase the boogeyman out of the closet and off to a place where bad dreams don't exist.

The King Middle girls are excited about Mrs. Walton's pageant. Personally, I been dodging that woman like a contagious disease ever since that circus show in class. I can't sit through a replay of my showdown with Curtis. But a small piece of me hopes that she'll shake some good sense into me and make me try out. Tell me I'm just as good as any other girl at King Middle. On the flip side, I'm praying that she'll do what all the other teachers do: ignore me and give me an A, because I'm one of the very few who even bother to do homework.

When I get to sixth period, I see Mrs. Walton has made some big changes in the room. The cavellike walls have been

painted a bright blue color. The tissue bombs are still stuck to the ceiling, but I guess she couldn't reach up that far. Posters of musicians are hung all around the room: Ella Fitzgerald, Beethoven, Bob Marley, the Beatles, Marian Anderson. The chairs are gone. All that remain are the piano, the piano bench, and a brand-new Mrs. Walton.

"In this room, we will sing," Mrs. Walton announces sternly. "There will be no rap battles, no copying off your friend's homework for your next class, and no reading"—she turns an icy glare toward me—"unless we are reading music. In this class, we will learn. Am I understood?"

Everybody's whispering. I hear "Mrs. Walton grew some balls," and "She ain't playing around with us no more," among other things.

"Am I understood, class?" She raises her voice, her frame growing ten feet tall.

"Yes, Mrs. Walton," we say in perfect unison.

She starts playing scales like she's possessed. The booming sound causes us all to stand at attention. And we begin to sing up and down the scales. I sing along softly. The voices around me are a mess: some nasal, some off-key, and both are drowning out those of us who could possibly be on key, like me.

"Curtis Dumont." She calls on Mr. Broken Train-Track Teeth, who is still playing around in the back of the class. "Sing the scale. *Alone.*"

The class starts to giggle. I can't help but laugh too. Mrs. Walton taps an F and nods for him to start there.

“Do re *meeee* . . .” His voice cracks into a high, operatic pitch before he can even get to the next note.

Once again everybody’s laughing. But I’m intrigued. The boy with the deep speaking voice actually sings like a girl. And even though I’d never tell him this, Curtis sounded . . . *all right*.

Mrs. Walton’s lips tighten as she shouts, “In this class, there will be no more insults! You are all capable of singing well. Curtis, you have a lovely, effeminate tone to your voice. You are an alto and will stand in the middle row.”

I so want to add, “with the *girls!*”

Curtis sinks his chest in a bit and makes his way to the middle row, away from his brassy-voiced friends in the tenor section.

“Vanessa, your turn,” Mrs. Walton calls.

I sigh, but not loud enough for Mrs. Walton to hear. My waistband tightens to the point where I feel like I’m gonna bust a button on my pants. That’s if I actually had buttons. Most have been replaced with safety pins. Maybe if I breathe deep, one of the pins will bust open and prick me in the stomach so I can go to the nurse.

I step forward, slow as can be. Everyone’s looking at me, and I swear I wanna throw up. It’s not like this at church. There I’m free. Whole. Here? I’m only half a person, judged by the way I look, the way I talk, the clothes I wear.

Mrs. Walton begins to play the scales again—this time, she says, in the key of G. I suck in a large breath and pray to baby Jesus.

Please sound good. Please sound good.

My eyes close tight as my voice climbs the scale, reaching the high G like it's nothing. I hold the last note way past the point of Mrs. Walton's piano pedal.

When I have released all the oxygen I can, I fade the note out and open my eyes. Everyone's staring at me.

"Excellent job, Vanessa. Tanisha was right the other day. You can sing. What a lovely soprano voice you have! Make your way to the front row."

Tanisha starts clapping hard, adding in a little squeal and a jump. But nobody else joins her. Just a few teeth-sucking sounds and a couple of whispers: "She think she all that." My insides cave in, shoulders collapsing into my chest.

Beatriz Mendez, decked out in red Reeboks, red earrings, and red lip gloss, rolls her eyes at me. I lower my head, my spirit deflating by the second. My fingers start to shake as I take my place in the front row, next to her. I put my imaginary blinders on and don't even look her way.

Mrs. Walton makes everyone sing like this until the bell rings.

"Vanessa, please remain in class for just a minute. I will write you a late pass for next period," Mrs. Walton says. When the room clears, Mrs. Walton's eyes get all wide, and I know what's coming.

"Remember the other day when I told you I have a friend sponsoring the school pageant?"

I nod my head slowly but don't say anything.

"You *are* trying out for Miss King Middle, right? I think

you'd be great." She pulls out the yellow flyer from her folder, laying it on top of the piano.

I look at it for a second, and when I lift my eyes, Mrs. Walton is straight cheesin'. My stomach is making gurgling noises, and I'm standing there praying that she doesn't hear them.

"Isn't this just wonderful? Especially with all the buzz about Vanessa Williams? This'll be perfect practice for when you eventually try out for Miss America. That's what being in a pageant is all about, you know. Not just being pretty. It's about talent and being a good student. And you are all that! You said you wanted to be Miss America, Vanessa," she says, "so here you go."

"This ain't—" I say, but then I see Mrs. Walton raise an eyebrow. "I mean, this *isn't* the Miss America pageant."

Note to self. No street talk around the white lady.

"No, it's not, but it's a step. How do you think those women in the real Miss America pageant got their start? By doing something small and working their way up. You can do this. You *should* do this," she says, shoving the flyer into my hand.

I bite the inside of my lip to the point where it could bleed any second. Then I flash back to when I watched the pageant. Sure, I pictured myself on that television screen, wearing a bomb-fancy dress, tearing up the stage with some grand, powerhouse song, and in the end having the crown placed on my head. But that wasn't the girl I pictured on the outside. That girl was a lighter, skinnier, prettier version of me. And that was fantasy. If I did this, I'd have to be onstage—the real me—in front of the entire school. Oh heck naw!

“I know what you’re thinking.” Mrs. Walton breaks my train of thought.

“I’m thinking, why in the world do you care so much?” I admit.

Mrs. Walton swallows hard and clutches her pearls like *How dare you ask me that?*

“Let’s just say that at one point in my life, I too wanted to be in the Miss America pageant. Only I didn’t have an opportunity like this.”

I take one look at that blonde hair, those blue eyes, and throw my head back, laughing toward the tissue-bomb sky. This lady is on something.

“You’re laughing, but it’s true. Times were tough for me and my family back then. I didn’t have anyone in my corner to help me toward that dream. I wasn’t as smart as you, or as well read and well spoken. Vanessa, it’s 1983 and this country has finally crowned a black Miss America. Sky’s the limit for you.”

My laughter cuts short.

“You’re wondering how you’re going to prepare for all of this, right?”

“Well, yeah . . . sorta,” I respond.

“I can help you with everything, especially your talent. We can practice in my classroom after school twice a week. And you don’t need any help in the academic-achievement portion. I looked at your files. High honor roll every marking period since kindergarten?” Mrs. Walton is talking in one long-winded breath and doesn’t even come up for air. “We can also

practice for the onstage interview, which shouldn't be so bad, given how much you read. And while I'd love to help you pick out a dress for formal wear, I'm sure your mom and dad will want to—"

"Listen, Mrs. Walton." I cut her off. "Thank you for thinking of me, but I can't do this pageant."

What I really want to say is Mama ain't around and Daddy don't have time for me anyway. So what's the point?

But my words turn into movement. Next thing I know, my feet are pushing me down the hall, my eyes are stinging, every single organ in my body is losing electricity, my hands are crumpling up the flyer and throwing it in the trash. Ain't gonna be no pageant. Not for me, at least. I got better things to do with my time anyway. And that's that.

September 23, 1983



The Beginning of the End

Once upon a time, there lived a little girl
with a mom and a dad and sunshine and love.

Then one day,
the mom ran far, far away,
the dad turned into the big bad wolf,
and the little girl never saw the sun again.
The End.

Dear Darlene,

You know we ain't never been into fairy tales anyway.

—Nessy,

Letting Go

🔔 “Nessy, get up. You gonna be late for choir practice!” The stank of Pop Pop’s whiskey-tainted breath burns my nose. The rest of him seems fine. His eyes are clear, not glassy like when he drinks at night. Beneath the faint layer of tart whiskey, I can smell Shield soap, so he must have showered already. He’s always good on the weekends, because according to him, the good Lord’s looking at him when he walks through the church doors come Sunday.

It’s the weekend, thank God. No school. And no dodging Mrs. Walton! All I got is church choir rehearsal today and Sunday service tomorrow.

In the background the news is playing, and the sizzle of something cooking in the kitchen perfumes the entire house. The gritty, bacony, syrupy scent drifts into my room, and I soon forget about the drunken cloud that surrounds Pop Pop.

“What time is it?” I ask, wiping the sleep out of my eyes.

“Almost eleven,” he says.

I can’t believe I slept this late. I blame that on Mama for seeping into my head and ruining what could have been a

perfect night's sleep. Tired of dreams keepin' me awake at night.

"Yo' teacher called here this morning, asking to speak to your mama."

My throat gets real tight. No teachers have ever called the house.

"What teacher?" I ask slowly.

"Lady named Mrs. Walton. Nussy, you didn't tell me you was singing in the school chorus. Well, I'll be!" Pop Pop slaps his good leg. It wiggles, while the World War II one stands motionless.

"She asked for Mama? What did you say?" My voice has elevated two octaves.

"I told her the truth—"

I stop breathing for a second. Oh Lord, here it comes.

"—that she wasn't here," he finishes, and his forehead double-creases.

It is the truth. She isn't here. I don't know where she is. Or if she's even alive, for that matter.

"Listen here, Nussy. I know you got a lot of questions and things on your mind. But it's best that you forget about your mama for now. All you need to know is that she loves you. One day when the time is right, I'm sure your daddy will explain everything. Plus, you got all the love you need right here." Pop Pop spreads out his arms real wide.

But where is she? The question whirls all through my head. It's the same one I've asked him for years, but all I'm ever met with are deaf ears and sealed lips.

He hugs me tight, and I breathe in his whiskey-fading, soapy-scented aroma. I do have love here with him and TJ, and I guess with Daddy.

I breathe a sigh of relief and rise up to get ready for choir practice.

We're singing "Goin' Up Yonder." TJ's singing lead. He's gonna tear the house down come Sunday morning! If only I had his courage to get out in front of an audience like that.

"She done told me about that pageant, Nussy," Pop Pop says, limping to the door.

"Pop Pop, I—"

He cuts me off. "Now looka here. I know you don't wanna do it 'cause you figure your mama ain't around to help you. Your mama would be proud. Heck, I am. I tell you one thing: doing that pageant would be like second nature to you."

"I don't want to, Pop Pop. And how you figure?"

"Just trust me. I think you should try out. Now I know your daddy won't approve, but let me deal with him. You got all the help you need right here. And that teacher who called here this morning seemed to want to help you. Now you march yo' pretty self into that audition next week!"

Pop Pop brushes his hand across my face. I know that in his eyes, I am pretty. And not just the pretty-for-a-dark-skinned-girl comments I sometimes get from the folks at church.

TJ comes walking down the hall, cheesin' so hard his mouth takes up his entire face. All I see are lips, teeth, and that big ole afro.

“I heard all about the pageant, Nessy, and you might as well do it!”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. I’ll think about it.”

“I could make all your clothes. I gotta design something for my final grade anyway. Come on. Do it for me,” TJ begs.

Pop Pop rolls his eyes. He doesn’t dig TJ’s fashion-designer dreams too tough, but he knows he has no say. TJ is a Martin. Daddy’s nephew. Daddy’s problem.

“Do it for us,” Pop Pop says, and wobbles down the hall.

I got lead in my feet as I creep toward the bathroom. My back presses against the door, and it slams shut with a booming thud. And then I proceed to do what I do best. Pretend. Shower on full blast. Eyes straight forward. Don’t even look at that tub. Fill up the sink with water. Washcloth in my hand. Bath mat beneath my feet. Handle my lady business. Make sure I don’t miss an inch. Look in the mirror and tell myself that this is all totally normal. Everybody’s afraid of something, right?

I get dressed and make my way toward the kitchen, sunlight pouring in through the window on that sorry-behind sunflower, feeding it with lies. That thing ain’t ever gonna live, no matter how hard it wants to.

Pop Pop’s made a spread: biscuits and gravy, bacon, eggs, and sweet tea. His southern grandma taught him to cook like this. My stomach is dancing at the sight of all the food, but my mind can’t stop thinking about Mrs. Walton’s nosy behind calling my house.

I sit at the table and start piling up my plate. It’s a long

haul to church on Saturdays. Between taking two buses and then walking seven blocks uphill, a girl needs her strength.

When I place a third biscuit on my plate, TJ shoots me a look with his lip upturned and snatches it back. “You are officially in pageant mode!”

“Hey, no fair!” I grab for the biscuit, but it’s already in his mouth. TJ’s so thin, he could eat a hundred biscuits and not gain a single pound.

In the Miss America pageant, the contestants have to prance around the stage in swimsuits. The flyer for the school pageant said nothing like that. Don’t get me wrong, it’s cool to watch it on television, but they’ll never catch my behind walking around in no swimsuit. No sir! These rolls ain’t made for sharing with the world.

We sit around the table, and Pop Pop and TJ are blabbing away about the pageant. Like they’re the ones in control and I’m gonna do whatever they say. Both of them are glowing just talking about it, and I start to wonder if the pageant has more to do with them than it does with me.

I can’t remember the last time I saw them so excited about something. TJ says he’ll make my dress red with silver sequins because red would look good next to my skin. It’ll have a train, like those real princess dresses have. He’s in design heaven right now.

Pop Pop couldn’t care less what I wear. His only request is that I sing his favorite gospel song, “Amazing Grace.” Every now and then he makes me sing that song to him while I braid his hair. He says I sound just like Mama when I sing it,

except my voice is more buttery than hers. I smile, listening to them go back and forth. I haven't even agreed to do the pageant yet.

A loud thud rattles the front door. We stop chatting and sit up like soldiers.

"Don't say a word. Let me do all the talking," Pop Pop whispers.

Daddy lumbers in, dropping his tool bag in the hallway. The silence in the room is thicker than them biscuits on our plates. He walks over to the counter with his footsteps earth-quaking everything around us. Even the glass jars in the pantry are shaking.

TJ sits up even straighter, puffing his chest out. God, I feel so bad for that boy. Every time Daddy walks through the door, I can hear the iron chains clank around TJ's heart, stripping him of what little dignity he has left.

I stare at Daddy square in the face, hoping he'll look my way. Maybe sit down and have a conversation with me. Ask me how school is going. But his eyes remain straight and unflinching.

"Good morning, Daniel. That job of yours sure got you working all kinds of times these days," Pop Pop says cheerfully.

"Yeah, Pop," he grunts back, gravelly voiced.

My father. Man of many words. There is a pleading in my head, echoing so loud I think all of Grafton can hear. *Daddy, I want to be in the school pageant. Daddy, I want to sing and dress up like Miss America.* The words swirl inside of me, swishing and swooping every which-a-way but out of my mouth.

“Nessy would like to try out for the school pageant, and I say she oughta,” Pop Pop proudly announces, squaring his shoulders.

At first Daddy doesn’t do or say anything. Just pours himself a cup of coffee, throws a couple of pieces of bacon on a paper towel, and starts to walk out of the kitchen. He stops short in the hallway.

“Pageant? Like that Miss America garbage?” he asks. “The one where them white girls prance around on stage in swimsuits, letting it all hang out for dirty men to feast their eyes on? The one where they finally let a black girl win after all these years? She ain’t even all that black, if you ask me! And Nessy wants to do something like that? Now, Pop, of all people you should know better!”

Daddy turns around, and our eyes meet. Mine wounded. His weary.

How would you or Pop Pop know? It’s not like that, Daddy. This one’s different.

I suck in a long breath, praying that he’ll say yes.

“Like hell she’ll try out. I can’t travel that road again.”

Daddy stomps his way to his bedroom, a few drops of coffee spilling onto the floor, and slams the door. The twisting of the locks and the clanking of the chains vibrate through every wall of the apartment. On the other side of that door, Daddy barricades himself in a room that is no doubt filled with nothingness.

And there I sit, swimming in his words. Drowning in his rejection.

“He’ll change his mind,” TJ whispers. He gestures for me to smile. But I can’t. I feel too hollow.

Pop Pop looks at me with pained eyes. “Don’t you worry about your daddy. You go on and audition, and I’ll deal with him later.”

What does Daddy mean, “travel that road again”? There’s gotta be a reason why he doesn’t agree with me doing the pageant. Maybe he doesn’t think I’m pretty enough. Maybe he’s right. If you’re gonna be black and be in a pageant, you gotta be light skinned with pretty hair. And I ain’t got none of that. Mama had it all, though. Me? I came into this world looking every bit like my father, with his blue-black skin, black hair, and even blacker eyes.

It’s probably for the best that I don’t audition anyhow. What was I thinking to even entertain the idea of being in a school pageant? Who would want to represent that beat-up, run-down King Middle anyway? Some bathroom stalls don’t even have doors!

“Y’all hurry up and get on to choir practice ’fore y’all be late!” Pop Pop picks up our dishes and hobbles to the sink. TJ and I grab our things and dash out of the house before we miss the bus.

There’s a slight chill in the air today. People are rocking hoodies and combat boots, and you just know the days of summer bliss are long gone. After way too long of a ride, the bus screeches to a stop right in front of Shabazz Park. We hop off and speed-walk up seven blocks to make it to choir practice on time.

The sun beams on the stained-glass windows of Cotton Temple. It's the prettiest building in a neighborhood surrounded by run-down apartment buildings and scattered litter in the streets. I always find my church's name to be a hootin' riot. All those years, black people were slaves, growing cotton and getting whipped over it—why in the world would anyone want to name a church after it?

The organ is thunderous when we step inside. The music crawls through my bones, seeps real deep into my skin. Sister Marie, our choir director, starts to run us through the list of songs we'll sing for tomorrow's service. Tomorrow is Founder's Sunday, which means we'll be celebrating Pastor Evans's father, who started the church back in 1945. It also means service will be extra long 'cause black folk just love celebrating that man. Every year, they go so long I swear I can see his ghost rise up from the dead and take his seat right there in the preacher's pulpit.

When it's TJ's turn to sing "Goin' Up Yonder," somebody screams out, "You better *saaaaaaaang*, Brother TJ!"

My cousin's voice bounces from wall to wall, filling up the entire room. Everyone is feeling it, and I can too. The sound coming out of his mouth is moving, cleansing, freeing. Like Maya Angelou's caged bird being released, flying past the jungle, past the ghetto, and up, up to the heavens. A feeling washes over me, and I forget about everything that's on my mind. My mom. My dad. School. Here I can just let go.

Ain't Miss America No Way



At seven o'clock on the dot, Tanisha calls.

“What’s up, girl? I saw *Beatrrrrriz* at the bodega tonight.” She rolls the *r* extra thick. Just hearing that name makes my fingers twitch.

“And?” I laugh out my response.

“She was talking hard about you and the pageant. How she saw Mrs. Walton asking you to do it, even though you don’t stand a chance ’cause you too dark skinned. How she’s gonna win, no matter what it takes. How nobody can step to her, blah blah blah. All her friends were laughing and egging her on, and when I got in her face for talking about you, she said she was kidding. But I don’t know. There was something about it that sounded like she meant it.”

I try my best to pretend like I don’t care. “Yeah, well, she can think what she wants. But thanks for sticking up for me.”

“Are you gonna try out? Make this chick eat her words?” Tanisha asks.

I suck in a quick breath.

“Hello? You there?”

“Yeah, I’m here. I don’t know. Maybe. . . . I will if you do it with me.”

Tanisha says nothing back.

“Are you there?” I ask.

“Try out for a pageant? Yeah, okay.” The words come out in a giggly, you-must-be-joking kinda way.

There is a silence between us, and I’m struggling to spit out how I’m really feeling. I want to mention that time she made me try out for the basketball team, knowing dang well I couldn’t even dribble a ball. That after I made a fool of myself and didn’t make it past the first cut, I still went to every single game, every single practice. That I have them all recorded in Darlene. Twelve games and sixteen practices, if we’re getting real specific. But I ain’t got the guts to say any of that, ’cause having one friend is better than having none.

I finally say, “I probably won’t try out for the pageant anyway. I’m ’a be busy with school, so . . .”

For a moment I consider telling her about Daddy and his reaction to me doing the pageant. But what would she know about that? Her father is at every basketball game because he’s her coach. Check that. Her number-one fan.

“That’s cool, I guess. Plus, who cares about that pageant? It’s not like it’s actually Miss America or anything.”

More silence. That last line lingers in the air, stinging me right down to my toes. *Who cares?*

Well, it’s obvious that she doesn’t. Tanisha’s probably gonna get into Saint Anthony’s High School on a basketball scholarship. Me? I got nothing like that waiting for me.

The faint sound of *Diff'rent Strokes* plays in the background on her end. Then Tanisha's mom calls her to come have dinner. I close my eyes real tight-like and picture the spread her mom's made: chicken-fried steak, mashed potatoes with gravy, and buttered corn, all with a side of love.

"Well, I gotta go. Don't forget the season's about to start. I need my favorite cheerleader in the bleachers."

"Yeah. Sure," I say real slow.

When we hang up, I'm feeling more confused than ever. Tanisha's not interested in trying out for the pageant with me, but she made sure to bring up me being there for her basketball. Her hopes. Her dreams. Her way out of Grafton.

Will I ever make it out of here? 'Cause one thing I know for sure, Saint Anthony's not interested in recruiting Tanisha *and* her groupie.

Part of me wants to do the pageant. But even with the strongest game face I can put on, I know that I'm no match for Beatriz Mendez. She can have that crown. Like Tanisha said, it's not like it's actually Miss America anyway.

Goin' Up Yonder



What I love best about Sundays is that not only is Pop Pop sober, but we get to pretend like we're something special, dressed in our Sunday best. Pop Pop wears his mauve bell-bottom suit and veteran's pin. His face is cleanly shaven, and he smells of Old Spice. All his weekday liquor sins are washed away, and I have my grandfather back, even if it's only for one day a week.

TJ looks handsome in his navy blazer with brown suede elbow patches. Since it's Founder's Sunday, all the women wear white. It's a symbol of purity and cleansing. That's tradition at Cotton Temple. My skirt is long and trimmed in white lace, with a white blouse to match.

My usual church shoes no longer fit, so TJ gives me a pair of low heels he got from school, and I can barely walk in them. The white patent leather is scratched a bit, and the bottoms are slightly worn out, but they're better than nothing. Can't go to church in my combat boots. I slip the hand-me-down heels on, and my knees turn inward. I'm so dang tall in these things. I buckle my shoulders to take away from looking like Vanessa the Giant.

“I want you to sing lead with me on ‘Goin’ Up Yonder,’”
TJ says.

“You gotta be kidding. I can’t sing that song with you, boy!
Everybody in church will be staring at me!”

“We sing together at home all the time. It’s time for you
to have an audience. You know all the parts, Nessy. Come on,
you can do it. This could be good practice for you if you decide
to audition for that pageant.”

Then I remember one of the poems I wrote in Darlene:

*Who travels a road full of twists, turns, cracked earth, and
flooded paths?*

Only to end up in a place where no one is waiting for you?

And like a lullaby, a tiny voice inside of me sings back: *You do.*

“Umm, yeah, I don’t know,” I say hesitantly, aware of the
uselessness of my dream. Daddy. Mama. Beatriz. Me? Too
many bumps in the road. All for a shiny crown.

Because of his prosthetic leg, Pop Pop can’t take two buses
and walk another seven blocks to church. So we take a car
service—a black town car from JP Transportation. Pop Pop
fought in World War II with the owner’s father, so they give
him that good ole battle-buddy hookup. Every Sunday it’s
like we’re Hollywood stars when that car pulls up in Grafton
Hill.

Church is on fire, as usual for Founder’s Day. Pastor’s
preaching up a storm, but all I got on my mind is this pageant.
Why I should definitely try out for it. And why it’s the stupid-
est idea I ever thought of.

But maybe being in the pageant would open a new world

for me. A chance to step away from the hut-two-three-four military routine that is my life.

Monday through Friday, school.

Saturday, choir rehearsal.

Sunday, church.

Repeat.

Repeat.

Somewhere, pushed deep beyond my fears, there's this thing I got inside me. It's called hope. Hope for Mama to come back. Hope for Daddy to come back to me too. And not as a shell of a man that I call my father. If Daddy gave it a chance, he'd see. The pageant could be a good thing, if only he'd open his mind a little.

The music for "Goin' Up Yonder" starts, and I see TJ stand up from the tenor row and stop at the soprano row. He extends his hand for me to join him.

"I'm gonna ask my cousin Vanessa to join me in singing this song to y'all today."

The church thunders in applause, and I see Pop Pop in the back of the pews jump up and shout, "Saaaaaaang, Nesity!"

The spotlight is on me, and the church grows quiet. One by one, beads of sweat form in an arc across my forehead. Fear begins to chew away at my insides. But then that tiny voice returns—bigger, louder than ever, daring me to give it a try.

Next to Pop Pop, a small woman—half his size, covered in an oversized white hat, white blazer, skirt, and gloves—begins to clap. I've never seen her at church, and I'm sure Pop

Pop is back there flirting with her for the whole service. But before I can get a better look, everybody is standing up, clapping to the beat of the song. All of a sudden something pulls me out of my seat, and my feet are moving forward. My mind is screaming at me, telling me to sit my behind down.

Maybe if I close my eyes, then I won't have to feel everyone else's piercing through me. When I do close them, I see her. Mama. With eyes you could swim in. Bluish brown or sometimes greenish gray, depending on the day. Smile so wide, warm, and perfect in every way. With her voice—a perfect blend of silk and honey and hummingbirds—she says, “Go on, princess, sing. Show them what you can do.”

Mama caresses my cheek. The heat of her fingertips injects me with confidence. Fills me with her love. Feeds me with what I've been craving all along. I will sing to bring Mama back, even if it's only for this moment right now, right here.

The organ thrums low as the percussion kicks in. TJ begins the first lyrics of the song. Then he passes the microphone to me. Every single hair on my neck stands in military style. I swallow a large dose of oxygen and let go. My voice pours out of me in perfect tune with the music. It is lightning breaking through the clouds. Earthshaking. I am free. And everyone is going wild, stomping and crying and lifting their hands up to the sky.

Mama stands in the front pew, taller than anyone, her shoulders square and proud. Daddy appears, standing beside her, beaming with his big ole hands wrapped around her

waist. And it's just like back in the day when we were the happily-ever-after Martins.

The choir joins in, blending in so sweet. Next thing I know, TJ and I are ad-libbing back and forth in harmony over the chorus. We're killing it.

When the song is over, Mama and Daddy melt away like snowflakes falling on wet ground. And everything is back to normal. Daddy's at work like always. And Mama? Well, she's exactly what I've always known her to be. A ghost.

But all around me people are still shouting and dancing. I see Pop Pop catching the Holy Ghost. He's wiggling and stomping that wooden leg of his up and down the aisles. The lady with the big ole face-covering hat is still up clapping, hands raised and spinning round and round. Pop Pop and his new friend are cutting up in the back of the church, having a good ole time.

After the service, I do my regular job collecting the hymnals from the choir rows. Pastor knows how much I love books. The hymnals are like my babies. I dust them off, placing each one delicately in its silk sleeve, and lay them out on the table next to the organ.

Just as I'm placing the last book down, a small hand touches my shoulder.

"I knew you were something special, Vanessa Martin."

I turn around and see Mrs. Walton. She's the little lady in the back of the church next to Pop Pop.

I stand there dumbfounded as Pop Pop wobbles up behind her. "Told you my Nussy here could sing her tail off."

“Indeed you did, sir, and that was quite impressive, Vanessa,” she continues. “I can’t wait to see you in the Miss King Middle pageant. You’re going to be awesome!”

Mrs. Walton sounds worse than a dang cheerleader. I wanna tell her that you can’t say the word *awesome* in Newark without somebody looking at you sideways, but what would it matter? Her time here is done, and in the next few minutes she’ll be hopping in her fancy car to head up 78, probably to a town where saying a word like *awesome* is perfectly fine.

I try and say something to her, but I’m stuck. I ain’t never seen a teacher outside of school. Do they even have a life beyond the classroom walls? Crazy as it sounds, growing up I always thought the teachers lived in school. Seeing my teacher here at church is just weird.

I stand there, torn between wanting to whack TJ and Pop Pop upside the head for scheming behind my back, and trying to figure out why, out of all the kids at King Middle, Mrs. Walton’s interested in me.

“You *are* going to audition, right?” She draws in closer to me and stares me down with those hypnotizing, ocean-blue eyes of hers. I breathe her in, and she smells like a mixture of everything nice in this world.

“Umm . . .” I search for an answer.

Pop Pop cuts in and introduces TJ—the third partner in this scheme of theirs. They exchange handshakes. The three of them are small-talking about me, pouring out compliments as I fight the urge to blush.

“That voice is something else,” Mrs. Walton says.

“Too bad she won’t even consider using it,” TJ shoots back.

I try to soak in this idea. Me up on that stage. Voice rising way above the ceiling. People jolting out of their seats. Hands clapping, happy tears flowing, prayers, both small and impossible, heard and answered. I did that here. Today. Maybe I can do it again, at the pageant this time. Bring back that feeling, the memory of Mama and Daddy together again.

“Okay, okay. Yes,” I say loudly. “I’ll give it a shot.”

They throw their hands up and squeal, and there I am, smiling on the inside. My own little cheerleading squad. Mrs. Walton hands Pop Pop two sheets of paper: the flyer for the pageant and a permission slip for the audition.

“Just be sure to have Vanessa’s mom or dad sign the permission slip for Friday because we will stay until five o’clock,” she says.

Pop Pop and TJ look at me with hesitation in their eyes. “Working all kind of crazy hours, Mrs. Walton,” Pop Pop says, “and he ain’t never really home. I take care of her, so—”

“Pop, I got this. I can sign it.” TJ grabs the paper.

Pop Pop snatches it out of his hands and smirks at Mrs. Walton. “Boy think ’cause he eighteen now, he a grown man.” Pop Pop pulls a pen out from his coat pocket, signs his name, and hands it back to her. “There you go.”

I keep my eyes fixed on the floor, hoping Mrs. Walton don’t ask no more questions. She doesn’t need to know nothing about my life. How I’m surviving on empty, waiting and hoping to be filled again.

“Good enough!” she says, and then she wraps her arms around me and holds me tight.

I stand there all stupid-like. Not knowing if I should hug her back. I push slightly away, but Mrs. Walton pulls me in farther, deeper. And then I let her take me in. In that moment an imaginary ax grinds down on my emotions, slicing them in equal parts: happy for the attention, even if it’s from a stranger, and angry that it ain’t coming from who I need it from most.

“Nice meeting everyone.” Mrs. Walton winks at me and then prances to the back of the church and out the door.

Like zombies under a spell, we trail behind her. Our eyes follow her to her car, a pastel-blue Chevrolet Celebrity with shiny silver rims.

We make our way to the town car waiting for us.

“Ooh-wee! That woman know she sho’ is fine!” Pop Pop says.

“Yes, Lawd!” TJ chimes in, slapping fives with Pop Pop.

Mrs. Walton’s blue car speeds away, past the church, past the garbage, and off to her own little land of sunshine.

September 27, 1983



Me and Darlene Against the Asphalt

Now I lay me down to sleep,
another tear I shall not weep.
Please work your magic through the night,
that I will wake with skin so light.
For this will bring a brighter day,
to light my path and guide the way.
And all the pieces will come together:
love, beauty, family, forever.

Dear Darlene,

Closed mouths don't get fed. Pop Pop would always tell me that when I was a little girl. If you don't say what's in your heart, it ain't never gonna come to you. Never really had no meaning for me until now. So tonight as the moon hovers outside my window, and the music drifts in with the midnight air, I make this my promise to myself. Every night, I'm gonna whisper this poem to the wind. And just maybe those words will turn into reality. Make me beautiful. Free me from the darkness that makes the outside world see me as less than pretty. Take me back to the place where I was once happy. Because here in this jungle, there ain't nothing but weeds and tears and dreams trapped beneath the asphalt.

—Nessy,

Pray Myself Invisible



Friday, comes last, and I'm having doubts about this audition stuff. Everybody's been talking about it at school all week. It's almost like Pop Pop is psychic or something 'cause he can sense my nervousness. Right before I leave for school, he gives me a star-shaped brooch to pin on my shirt.

"Your mama used to wear this every time . . ." His voice drifts off.

"Every time what, Pop Pop?"

The light in Pop Pop's eyes dims. "Every time she needed a little luck. She'd be proud of you doing this pageant. Just try your best today, Nessy. And don't worry about yo' daddy. We'll keep it between us."

Another secret to add to the collection in our household. Seems these days you could paint the walls with the secrets we have.

After school Tanisha and I make our way to the auditorium. By the way she's dragging her feet, I can't tell if she's mad because I forced her to come or plain tired from playing basketball during gym. When we get there, it's packed. Every inch of the room is filled with King Middle girls. Some are

taking it seriously and practicing their routines. Some are there only to make fun of the ones who look like they don't know what they're doing. I see everything from step routines to praise dancing to rapping and singing.

A small crowd gathers around Beatriz as she stands in front of the first-row seats. She's got on a costume, dressed to the nines. No one told me that we could audition in costumes! Not that I have one anyway, but still. Beatriz has on a bright-red leotard with a long, white, ruffy skirt and a blue silk flower in her hair.

"Dang, *chica*, your outfit is too fly," I hear Beatriz's friend, Maricela Vazquez, say. That girl is Beatriz's number-one butt kisser.

"We know that you'll win the pageant. You got this hands down," Julicza Feliciano chimes in. Butt kisser number two.

Tanisha and I walk down the aisle to find seats. It just so happens that the only ones available are in the second row. Dead behind where Beatriz and her crew are standing.

"My *abuela* sent me this outfit from Puerto Rico. You know when you have an audition you gotta go the extra mile. Take it seriously, especially when you're trying to win. Too bad not everyone got that memo," she says, staring my way, cutting her eyes straight through my skull. Her little audience looks at me and starts laughing.

Tanisha sucks her teeth real loud. "Got a problem?"

A sick feeling buries itself real deep inside me, like a thousand roaches crawling all over me, worse than what we got in our kitchen. And all I wanna do is fill up the tub with Raid

and drown myself in it. Not that I even ever set foot in the tub. That thing's got demons in it. Standing at the sink to handle my business is fine by me. That's how they did it in the old days anyway.

Besides, Beatriz Mendez never paid me no mind before, and we've been going to school together since she moved here from Puerto Rico in second grade. But I can't help but wonder if she's right. What am I thinking? I'm not dressed up for this thing. Why'd I even come in the first place?

The teachers walk in, followed by our principal, Mrs. Carlisle. She's all tall and stone-faced, wearing a black-and-white pinstripe suit. As usual she is carrying her bullhorn. That woman carries that thing everywhere. She yells through it to get everyone to stop talking.

Beatriz and her butt kissers take seats in that front row, like it was reserved for them all along.

"Ladies, I would appreciate your attention. Your teachers Mrs. Walton, Mrs. Ruiz, Mrs. Moore, and Mrs. Caldwell have been working very hard to produce a quality event for you. You will behave as young ladies. Four girls from each grade will be selected to participate, and the final results will be posted outside of the cafeteria tomorrow. Good luck."

And just like that, Mrs. Carlisle storms out of the auditorium, with her back so straight and her face so tight that we are hypnotized into silence long after she is gone.

I scan the panel of teachers responsible for choosing the contestants. Mrs. Walton, without a doubt, will pick me. She literally begged me to try out. Seeing her there is enough to

keep my behind in my seat. Mrs. Ruiz is the eighth-grade Spanish teacher. She's built like a brick house with mounds of blonde hair, though I'm sure she dyes it that color, because the roots are black. Hands down, she is the best-dressed teacher in the school, always decked out in the flyest gear: designer handbags, blazers with jeweled buttons, and a pair of high heels to match each color of the rainbow. Mrs. Ruiz is extra popular with the Latino kids. Even though I make straight As in her class, I doubt she even knows my name. Beatriz'll probably be her number-one pick. Mrs. Moore is the only gym teacher I've ever known who's actually physically fit. Everybody calls her the drill sergeant. Body made of pure steel. Hair always braided in tight cornrows. Honestly, I think she only passes me out of pity. Every now and then she throws me a little jab to remind me to "make exercise a part of my daily routine." I probably don't stand a chance with her either. Then there's Mrs. Caldwell. Poor, poor Mrs. Caldwell is way past her prime. She should've stopped teaching history a long time ago. She's so old and forgetful that most of the time the students are the ones teaching the class. I'm hoping that in the middle of her dozing off, she'll do me a solid and give me a good score.

For the first part of the audition, everyone has to perform their talent. A lot of the girls take it as a joke. They're up there dancing to rap music and throwing their booty back and forth. I cringe and sink low in my chair. Half of this stuff would never fly on the Miss America stage. Good Lord, what have I gotten myself into?

The teachers announce Tanisha's name, and I get all tingly inside. I'm nervous for her, nervous for me too. She rises up slowly out of her chair and says, "I still can't believe you talked me into this nonsense."

Goose bumps spill out all over my arms. I need Tanisha to get up there and kill it. I need us both to kill it and pass the audition, 'cause I can't do this pageant alone.

The beat kicks in to "The Breaks" by Kurtis Blow. Nobody can resist this style of music, with its hypnotizing beats and poetic rhymes. Next thing I know, Lanetta Gainer and Kayla Knight bust out of their chairs and start popping and locking and singing the song so loud, Tanisha can barely be heard on the microphone. She just kind of stands there, mouthing the words, looking at the floor, not really doing much else.

I'm in the audience, flailing my arms like an idiot, signaling for Tanisha to let loose. It's like Lanetta and Kayla are the ones auditioning instead. Work the stage, Tanisha! Move to the left. Now move to the right. Look at the judges. That's how they do it at Miss America. But Tanisha never looks up, not even for a second.

On the basketball court Tanisha's always showing off, always on fire, smiling and dancing when she makes a three-pointer. On the court she's a true entertainer, and the crowd always goes wild for her silly antics. Who is this person on the stage?

When the song ends, Tanisha breathes a sigh of relief and runs off the stage.

"How'd I do?" Tanisha asks as she sits next to me.

“You did good,” I lie. “I’m just happy you came with me.” That last part was the truth, though.

Tanisha laughs. “Please, girl. I know I sucked! It’s not that easy up there.”

Even though Tanisha didn’t give it her all, I’m convinced she’ll pass the audition. ‘Cause when you look like Tanisha, everything comes easy. She’s got the triple-L pageant package: light skin, long hair, long legs.

Stephanie Bowles from the sixth grade is called next. She sings “Home” from *The Wiz*. She’s dressed up just like Dorothy too. Red bows holding up each curly ponytail, silver shoes, and a white ruffy dress. Not only does she look dope, she’s got the whole Broadway singing voice down pat. In front of me, Beatriz and her friends are giggling and whispering, probably making fun of Stephanie.

By this point I’m ready to leave. I’m not about to go up there so they can laugh at me too. Singing in church the other day was different. I had a choir behind me and TJ at my side. There was a church organ playing music and filling up my soul. There was Mama and Daddy in the front row, even though I imagined them there. Here they ain’t nowhere to be found. Here I got nothing but a row full of mean girls ready to chew me down in one bite. Here I’m gonna have to go up on that stage *alone*. The aisle leading from my seat to the entrance of the auditorium grows to three miles long. If I leave now, everyone will see me and think that I’m nothing but a punk.

Why didn’t I have the good sense to at least dress up for this thing? Why can’t I have nice clothes like everyone else?

These other girls have all kinds of extra things to make their talents stand out. They got costumes and music and props. All I have is my oversized sweatshirt, bell-bottom jeans, beat-up sneakers, and this voice. No music. No costume. No frills.

The audience claps for Stephanie. Even some of the eighth graders are giving her props (except for Beatriz and her followers, of course), and that's hard to get when you're an underclassman. Next thing I know, Mrs. Caldwell stands up to read the next name on the list. Her eyes get real wide when she sees my name. "Surprised to see you on this list. Vanessa Martin, you're up."

My entire body is glued to my seat, frozen, motionless. *Surprised? Like a good surprise or a bad one?* Tanisha elbows me in the ribs so hard, I let out a hefty cough. My hand rises to Mama's brooch, and I rub my fingers over each point of the star. On the inside I'm pleading with her to magically appear like she did at church, walk on up there with me. I scan the audience, and all I see are eyes and eyes and eyes. None of them Mama's. I suck in my breath and fear, releasing them as I prepare to walk toward the stage. Then I hear Beatriz whisper to her friends.

"*Mira esa gorda negra,*" she says, and her crew starts giggling.

Nine years of living in the projects, three years of taking Spanish in school, and toss in the countless times I've caught Beatriz cheating off my test during Spanish class? How dumb does this girl think I am?

My feet stop just before the top step. There's a rumble in the pit of my belly, and I let the next scene play out in my head.

"I heard what you said. I got every bit a right to try out, just like you do. Comprendes, chica?" I look her dead in the face. Chest puffed out. Flames burning in my eyes, shooting out straight at her.

Beatriz and her stupid friends drop their jaws. Like how dare I talk to the "queen" like that?

The audience breaks out with a few rounds of "Oh no, she didn't" and "Ooh, she told you!" And I'm feeling good.

Next thing I know, all the girls jump out of their auditorium seats and bum-rush me, lifting me up with their hands, marching me around the school, singing my praises for chopping the school witch down to size.

"Um . . . sometime today, Vanessa," Mrs. Caldwell yells out.

I shake my head, snapping back to reality, feet moving me toward the stage. Beatriz Mendez will always be Beatriz Mendez. Her words turn to knives. Those knives cut skin—open, wounded, guts spilling out for everybody to see. 'Cept there ain't no blood. Just a sinking feeling that this ain't where I belong.

Beatriz doesn't have to whisper to her friends that I'm big ("beautifully plump" is what Pop Pop calls it). And she don't have to remind them that I'm dark skinned. They can see it. Heck, everyone can. I'm the one who has to look at myself in

the mirror every day and ask God every night to take it away. So far I'm thinking either God's too busy or just plain deaf.

"Vanessa, what will your talent be today?" Mrs. Ruiz asks.

Right about now, running out of here and straight home seems like a pretty solid option. I could forget that all this even happened. Maybe I could change schools so I don't have to look at these people anymore.

"Vanessa?" Mrs. Walton interrupts my rambling thoughts.

"I . . . I'm gonna sing 'Goin' Up Yonder.'" The words stutter out of my mouth.

Confidence, where are you?

"Do you have a cassette tape or any kind of music?" Mrs. Moore asks.

I look down at my sneakers, searching for a way to make myself disappear. Never ever—ever—have I felt so unprepared.

"Well, did you even try to get yourself together for this audition?" Mrs. Caldwell throws her pen in the air, her mouth all twisted up at me like I'm wasting her time.

Mrs. Walton pops up out of her seat and says, "Yes! Yes, she has music!"

"I do?"

And next thing I know, Mrs. Walton's heels are click-clacking their way over to the grand piano below the stage. "Now you do."

She throws me a nod and begins to play the song. And the way she's playing it takes me right back to Cotton Temple. She attacks each chord with vigor, like the spirit done took

over her whole body. Each note courses through me, rushing like warm rivers in my veins. Next thing I know, I close my eyes, and I am flying high to that special place. The place where I forget about every mean thing people have to say to me or about me. My first note comes out, clean and pure, and I soar.

I don't get halfway into the song before Tanisha jumps up and starts clapping. Then Mrs. Ruiz and Mrs. Moore get up too. But nobody else does. Not Mrs. Caldwell, but that old fart can barely stand as it is. It's like Beatriz got everyone else in the audience under her spell. Like if they even tried to get up, they'd shatter to pieces the moment Beatriz glared at them. Funny how power works like that.

When I finish, Tanisha and the teachers are hooting and hollering. Screaming like a bunch of fools.

"Wow, Vanessa. That was quite impressive," Mrs. Moore says. "And Mrs. Walton, who knew you play gospel music?"

"There's a lot you'd be surprised to know about me," Mrs. Walton replies, and she winks at me on her way back to the judging table.

As I leave the stage, Tanisha screams, "Girl, you were too fly!"

Señorita Evil Eyes is already throwing daggers my way.

When I take my seat, Tanisha whispers in my ear, "Straight up, I think Beatriz is jealous of you, Nessy."

I suck my teeth. *Yeah, right.*

"Next up is Beatriz Mendez," Mrs. Ruiz calls out.

All of Beatriz's friends and several underclassmen jump to their feet, like they're cheering at a basketball game. Beatriz

sashays toward the stage with her ruffly skirt swaying from side to side.

She announces that the song she'll dance to is "Quimbara" by Celia Cruz. The music blasts through the speakers, and Beatriz fires her hips across the stage floor. She twirls her hands and spins round and round to the music. Her skirt flashes red, white, and blue, the colors of the Puerto Rican flag.

When the chorus comes in, Beatriz does this move where her back arches in and her booty pushes out. She gyrates that thing over and over like a snake. A smirk spreads across her face as she sees me hawking her backside. I quickly lower my eyes and pretend I dropped something on the floor and bend over to look for it. What a freaking show-off!

Of course, when she's done, her friends are giving her a standing ovation and so are all the other girls. Probably more out of kissing her butt than thinking she was actually any good. Come on—shaking your booty isn't really a talent. That wouldn't cut it on the Miss America stage.

The next round of the audition is the formal walk. Mrs. Walton explains to us how we should do it. There are four X marks on the stage. We must enter from behind the stage curtains three at a time, stopping at each X before it's time to hit the X in the middle of the stage. Mrs. Walton tells us to put on our heels, and I just about crumble to a pile of dust because I forgot mine.

"Don't worry. You can borrow these as soon my turn is over. That's what friends are for, right?" Tanisha says as she makes her way to the front.

I hate that we're lined up in alphabetical order. Tanisha's up there with all the B's, and here I am standing in my holey tube socks, sandwiched between all the M's and N's, with Beatriz tailing right behind me. She giggles and whispers real low so this time I can't hear her. I sink into my oversized sweatshirt and pray myself invisible.

Soon as Tanisha's done modeling, she runs backstage and tosses me her heels. Her shoes are pretty: black patent leather with a strap connected to a flower. It's almost my turn, so I pull off my socks and slam my feet into the shoes. As soon as I do, my feet puff out worse than a busted-up can of biscuits. Foot fat all fighting to break free. Knees all wobbly and awkward. Everyone else is having a fine time in their heels. No trouble at all.

When my name is called, I wobble to the X in the middle of the stage, imagining that this must be how Pop Pop feels walking on his prosthetic leg. My knees are clapping as I do the pivot turn. The girls on television at the Miss America pageant make this look so easy. I quickly pivot around. My neck whips forward before the rest of my body can catch up. Next thing I know, my arms jut out sideways like an airplane to keep myself from falling, but that doesn't work. My butt slaps against the wood so hard that I swear it might split in half. The low sound of laughter boils the skin on my cheeks, and I jump up and dart offstage, grab my backpack, and fly out the door before it gets any louder. I don't even stay to see how Beatriz does, which I am sure is pretty darn near perfect. Why can't God just snap his fingers and make me the same

way? Why didn't I listen to Daddy? He was right. This ain't a road for me to travel.

I don't know what I was thinking, letting Mrs. Walton, Pop Pop, and TJ drag me into this circus show. Tanisha's probably gonna be mad at me for bouncing on her like that, especially since I forced her to try out. But I can't take one more second in that auditorium.

When I get home, I walk past Pop Pop, who is in a whiskey coma on the couch, slam my door, trap myself in my room, pray to God for an escape from my life, and stare at the Miss America posters on my wall, knowing full well I never stood a chance.