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Crossroads: A Novella

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I dedicate *Crossroads:A Novella*

To Prof. Flowers who yelled at me with love, and

To Marian Cappelletti who has nurtured and loved me for
five years.

One: Raphael

I knew my mother so well that I could tell her mood just by how hard the door slammed. That night, she slammed the door with the fierceness of a woman who had not known an easy day in years. I woke up from my nap and listened. She flung her keys onto the table and stomped angrily into the kitchen. Today. I felt it in my bones. Today was going to be that day. The day when we fought it out like only a hardworking West Indian mother and a lazy piece of shit rebellious daughter could. When I woke up that morning, I found her usual note on my door. “Tahaj, instead of spending today eating all of the food that I work so hard to buy, please clean this house. If I can work on a Saturday, so can you.” I knew what that meant. By 11:30, when my mom usually made it home from her nursing shift, there was supposed to be a plate of dinner for her in the microwave. There was supposed to be a sparkling kitchen and a well swept, put together, living room. Last Saturday, I had been a good daughter. This Saturday, I had spent the day with my friend, Chante. Before I left her house, I told her that my mother and I were going to fight tonight and that I would probably be back in the dead of the morning. In the corner of my room, I had my duffle bag packed. My body was frozen as I heard my mother survey the house. I could feel the rage in the air.

My mother turned my door knob. When she found it locked, she kicked and pounded on the wooden door. I heard her run to the kitchen and get a knife. I sat up just as she effectively opened the door. For one moment, she just looked at me. She looked around my bedroom, her nose was wrinkled as she took in the clothes

and books scattered everywhere. She was thin. Her body didn't fall out her clothing properly. She was a woman who worked hard and didn't eat enough. There weren't enough hours in the day for her to catch a bite. Her relaxed hair was pulled into a severe ponytail and her face was sunken in. Somehow, you could still see the traces of the beautiful woman that she had once been. The high cheekbones, the full lips. Even though she was tired after her long shift, she was as ready for the fight as I was.

"You see Tahaj. You must think that I am playing with you. That's what you think."

"And you must think I am a live-in maid. Or, maybe your slave."

"Slave? You don't even begin to know what being a slave is. When I was your age, my mother was in her bedroom, slowly dying of cancer. You know who held down the house? Do you know who did the groceries, cleaned the house, paid the bills, cooked for me and my little sister? I was the one taking on the responsibility and you can't get your ass up and clean this apartment?"

"How many times must I hear this story? So because you had a hard life, I have to have one too?"

The slap came from out of nowhere. The December cold was still in her palm. The stinging made my eyes leak. She slapped me again on the other side of my face. Years of hard work had made my mother stronger than she looked.

“What’s the point of having a daughter if all she does is eat and sleep? You don’t do shit in this house. You are sorry and ungrateful. You know I’m the only one doing this. Your father ran off and left. If it wasn’t for me, who would give a shit about you?” She turned and left the room.

“I want to enjoy life. Why should I have to work all the time like you?” I muttered through tears. I got up and pulled on my jeans and a sweater. I grabbed my keys and my duffle bag. Right before I opened the front door, my mother’s room door opened.

“Tahaj-Marie, where are you going at this time of night?” I closed the door, locked it and walked away. I tried not to cry on the short train ride to Chante’s house, but when she opened the door, the tears did come.

Chante comforted me over ice-cream. “Tahaj, that’s life. We all fight with our mothers. I say stay with me till she cools down. And look, it’s one in the morning. Today is New Year’s Eve. It’s time to party, not be crying over nothing. Let me show you my new dress.”

Chante’s bubbly enthusiasm depressed me even more. She would never have to go through anything like this. Her beautiful, over-indulgent mother did all of the house work. Her father worked as an accountant and made enough money to keep everyone in the family happy. I tried my best to not be resentful, but it really did seem that Chante had it easy. She was the type of girl that couldn’t walk down one New York City block without gaining male attention. At 16 years old, she had

a 21 year old boyfriend. She received special treatment from everyone, from the moment that she was born. Her mother and a father lavished her with money, clothes, and anything she could desire.

Chante was a perfect hour-glass shaped size 10, while I was an unsatisfactory size 16. I'm not even sure why Chante and I were friends. Sometimes, beyond her bubbly personality, I felt Chante wanted a sidekick, somebody she could overpower with her personality and cast into the shade with her beauty. When we met in first grade, it was an unexpected match. Everyone oohed and aahed over how nice Chante was for befriending the awkward, chubby, quiet, smart girl, but even then Chante knew who to have in her corner to get her way. Over the years, I helped her with her homework, and helped her cheat her way through life. For the most part, I smothered any resentment that I had towards Chante, but there were times when I looked at her and felt cheated. The one boy, Michael, that I had a crush on since 5th grade, was visibly in love with Chante, and didn't even know that I existed.

"You don't expect me to let this dress go to waste- do you? Look at how sexy I look!" Chante exclaimed, as she posed in front of her mirror. She looked amazing in a short, tight, black, sequined dress.

"I am so sexy!" Chante repeated as she modeled around her bedroom.

I imagined the eyes of men bulging out of their sockets and sighed. Why go to a party just to watch all your friends get all of the attention? How much more could I take?

“You don’t have to let your dress go to waste, but why do I have to go with you? I’m not in the mood this year. You know you can always go with Monae,” I said as I lied back on her canopied bed.

“First of all, Monae is definitely going. But the more people that go, the more fun you have, Tahaj. God! All you need is a cute, sexy dress. Why are you being so boring? We can go to the ave’ right now to find one. I can even buy it for you and you can pay me back later. And you can borrow a pair of my sister’s shoes. And I can do your hair, and I have makeup! Let me get dressed.” Chante pulled off her dress and put on a pair of skin tight jeans and a white t-shirt. She grabbed her purse and then found her keys on her dresser.

“Monae doesn’t live far. She can meet up with us. It will be fun,” Chante said as she pulled on a leather jacket lined with fur.

“Sure,” I said, as I zipped up my puffy winter coat.

Back at Chante’s house, I examined myself in her full length mirror. The short, purple, fitted dress accentuated my curves. I looked good. I smoothed my hands over the slight curves in my hips and outlined the roundness of my breasts. I felt sexy.

“This doesn’t look too bad. But I don’t know about this wig Monae lent you,” I patted the long, black, synthetic hair and smoothed down the bangs. I didn’t look anything like myself.

“Girl, please, you look good! And we’re going out. Don’t you want to look glamorous? Don’t you want to go all out? You can’t be Miss Bookworm forever. Let me go get a pair of heels from my sister. What size do you wear again?”

“A ten. My feet are a little big, I know.” Chante left the room and came back dangling a pair of shoes from her hands. “These are the biggest shoes she has. They are a 9 and a half, but they are open toed so you can pull them off. Don’t mess them up or she will kill me. I don’t know what girl doesn’t own a pair of heels. Hmm, hmm, hmm,” Chante tutted disapprovingly.

“Whatever, Chante. What the hell I am going to do with high heels? I’ll make these work,” I took the 3 inch high, suede heels from her.

“Where is Tonia anyway?”

“Where else? My sister is always at her man’s house. She might as well move in.” Chante did a belly flop onto her bed.

“What’s up with you and George?” I probed as I turned around to look at my butt in the dress.

“We alright, we’re supposed to be going out later this week.”

“How long have you two been dating again?”

“Three months. I think I like this one. He took me to the movies last week and he was acting like he was so in love with me. But you already know- I just got it like that.”

At the New Year's Party, there were other big girls on the crowded line. I scanned the plus size women waiting to get into the club. The thing about carrying any extra weight is you have to *own it*. When you don't *own it*, and strut in with that confidence, people are like vultures. They can sense any hesitation, any insecurity. When we got out of the taxi and I walked in behind Chante and Monae, I had one moment of insecurity. I worried that I didn't *own* my tight purple dress, that maybe I looked like a grape, and Chante's sister's size 9.5 heels were not a match for my size 10 feet. I wobbled a little in the heels. When I recovered, I noticed that everyone, man and woman, was eyeing Chante's 5'6 curvy, sequined frame. Monae's petite toned body, which was alluringly clothed in a brown leopard printed dress, attracted an equal amount of attention. We started to walk toward the line.

“Hey, chocolate,” one man called out to Monae. She smirked and put a little extra sway in her step. A part of me thought the decision to come was a mistake. I felt like everyone was watching me, shaking their heads, wondering why I had even bothered to show up. One guy looked back and forth, from me, to Chante, to

Monae. “What the fuck? Why is it that the pretty girls always have fat friends?” he asked. The men around him laughed hysterically. Chante kept walking, and pretended as if she had not heard. Monae whispered in my ear, “Don’t let that asshole spoil your night. He is just the usual rude ass piece of shit!”

A tall man with dreadlocks walked towards me. “Some men don’t know sexy if it hits them over the head.” I smiled gratefully at him and continued in.

“You okay?” Monae asked, after we were settled at the bar. Chante was already on the dance-floor. She was dancing with a boy with long, braided hair who had not wasted a second in asking her to dance.

“About what happened earlier? I’m cool,” I responded. “Everyone is going to have haters.” Inside I wanted to die.

“That’s right, Tahaj. But I think tonight, you have an admirer.” She flicked her eyes pointedly in a direction behind me. I turned around to find the same guy from earlier looking in my direction. He smiled at me when he noticed me looking and started to saunter in my direction. He stopped right in front of me.

“Sweetheart, would you like to dance?” he asked in a deep, raspy voice.

“Umm,” I stuttered a little and felt my mind go blank.

Monae looked from me to the man, pinched my arm, and gently pushed me forward.

“Of course she would like to dance,” she replied for me. I giggled and got up from the stool, trying not to wobble in my skinny heels. I handed Monae my clutch.

The man took me by the arm and led me to the dance floor. Before we walked inside, I stopped to ask him his name.

“Raphael.” He said back into my ear. The feel of his breath on the side of my face made me shiver a bit. “You?”

“Tahaj,” I replied.

Crushed in the throngs of sweating people, Raphael and I danced for an hour straight. I knew that Chante was curious. I could sense her desire to know who was paying me this amount of attention. Once, while she was standing in the corner of the room, I turned and caught her eyes on me. I smirked and continued grinding my body against Raphael’s solid 6 feet tall frame. His muscular arms felt protective around my waist. He was wearing a blue and white button-up shirt and close fitting dark jeans. His dreadlocks were tied back in a long ponytail. When I started to feel tired and overheated, Raphael asked if I wanted to head back to the bar and get a drink.

When he asked what I wanted to order, I told him that I needed something non-alcoholic.

“Why?” he asked, with a sharp edge in his voice. He looked at me suspiciously.

“How old are you?”

I debated between telling him the truth and lying. In the end, I softly replied. "I'm 16. I will be 17 in a few months though."

"Sixteen?" he said, with shock. He looked me over. "In what way are you sixteen? When are you turning seventeen?"

"Yea, I am sixteen. My birthday is in March. How old are you?"

"I am twenty-six. Sweetheart, tell you what. I will buy you a drink and you keep me in mind for when you turn eighteen. I'm not trying to go to jail. How did you even get in here?"

"My friend knows the bouncer."

He paid for a virgin colada, and made a show out of bowing towards me and kissing me on my hand. "Take care, baby," he whispered into my ear before he disappeared into the crowd. When I finally made it back over to Chante and Monae, drink in hand, Chante was in an obvious bad mood. Her face was twisted into a scowl.

"He bought you a drink? Why didn't he ask if any of your friends wanted drinks? That's so rude of him." She flipped back the hair of her long wig and sucked her teeth.

"Why would a stranger have to buy drinks for three girls?" I replied tartly.

“The question is, why wouldn’t he? He knew that the three of us came together. I’m ready to get the fuck out of here,” Chante demanded. Immediately, she got up and made her way to the exit.

“Why is she mad?”

“The guy that she was dancing with didn’t want to buy her a drink. She started yelling at him, and called him cheap, but he just laughed and walked away. Whatever. She’s probably jealous because your guy friend bought you one. You know how she is, always a sweetheart until someone is getting more love than her.”

“Happy 2004!” people yelled as we passed. Monae and I smirked and followed Chante’s erect back out the door.

On March 21st, while I was lying on bed wondering why my birthday felt like any other day, my aunt Ebony called. Her warm voice felt like she was hugging me through the phone. I imagined her on her plush brown couch. Ebony was the Amazon of the family. She was tall, dark, and curvaceous. After she wished me a happy birthday, she asked me, in her usual direct tone, if I was at home and how I was doing.

“I worry about you a lot you know. Being an only child and all, and your mother is always working. How is everything?”

“Aunty, I’m home. My friend, Monae, is trying to get me to go out tonight. But I’m still debating if I want to go.”

“Well, I have a surprise that might lift you up. Tahaj. I’m in New York, and I’m in the lobby in the front of your building. Don’t hang up yet. Buzz me in.” I heard the doorbell buzzing. I pressed the button to allow my aunt upstairs. Before I knew it, Ebony was in front of me, her 5’10 inch body enveloping me in a hug. Her red lipstick glowed against her chocolate brown skin. She was wearing a leather jacket along with a black dress and leggings. Her French tipped manicured nails were at least two inches long. On her side, she carried a pink, high-end, designer bag. As usual, she looked truly chic. She gave me a long hug and then stepped back to look me over. She smelled like strawberries and her face was made up impeccably, with the focus being on her bright red lips. She looked me up and down and then smiled.

“It’s been too long since I have seen you. You are growing into such a beautiful woman.” She sashayed into the apartment and sat down on the leather couch.

“I’m sure my sister is at work.” I nodded. “Alright, ma’am. What are you waiting for? I drove all the way from the ATL to see you, baby. Get ready, we are going out for your birthday. I’m going to take you shopping and out to eat.”

I showered and dressed in jeans and an orange t-shirt. As we drove in her royal blue Honda, Ebony played Jill Scott and Angie Stone, and sang along in a voice

worthy of its own recording session. At *Ashley Stewart*, Evelyn fussed over me, and collected an armful of clothes for me to try on.

“I like purple, pinks and blues on your skin tone,” she murmured as she picked out a few of the tops and a pair of jeans. She paid for what we liked the best.

As we walked up Flatbush Avenue, I became aware that nearly every man we passed did double takes. Sometimes she flirted with a few with her eyes, but for the most part, she laughed at the attention.

“Tahaj, I need you to know that whatever, whenever, I am here. I understand anything you’re going through. I just came out of the worst time period of my own life. I lost my job, and then my man just up and left me. I got so depressed, I was just sick for days. But you know what, honey? That’s his loss.”

“Why did he leave?”

“We had started to argue a lot. We were having problems, and then I guess he found someone he wanted more than me.”

“That’s impossible. I don’t believe he found someone better than you.”

“Thanks sweetie. But, you know what? There’s always another job, and there is always another man. But there is only one me. I got a home, I got food, and I have clothes? I can’t complain.”

I followed my aunt, as she looked both ways and then crossed the busy street.

“Aunty, I’m just disappointed with my life. I feel like I’m overweight. I don’t even have a boyfriend. My mother and I are always arguing about it, and I’m just sick of it being an issue in my life.”

“You know something? I knew that this would be a problem in your life. You were overweight as a child. When you were younger your mother fed you a lot of McDonalds and KFC. I disagreed with it because it was unhealthy and you were gaining too much weight from that type of food. One time I was visiting New York from Florida and I took you to the bathroom and lifted you up onto the toilet seat without realizing how heavy you were. I almost broke my back. That was when I realized that you were way too heavy for a five year old.”

“I don’t blame my mother. I know that she was only 23 when she had me and maybe she didn’t know any better.”

“You know the only thing that bothers me is how she made you feel growing up. Another time when I was visiting New York, we were on our way to an amusement park and she got angry at you and slapped you in front of everyone and called you fat. You started crying and I had to go and comfort you to try to make you feel better.”

“I don’t even remember that exact incident. Things like that happened sometimes with my mother.”

“That’s exactly what I disapprove of. Come on. Let’s go in this beauty supply store for a second.”

We walked in and Ebony started browsing the hair products.

“It wasn’t always easy for me. One day, I had to look in the mirror and say fuck it. Fuck whoever had a problem with me. Tahaj, it starts with you. It’s not about having a boyfriend, or losing weight. That will come in time. Our parents are not perfect. Sometimes they are trying their best with what they have. Understand? Anyway, I’m hungry. Where do you want to eat? Let’s go to a real restaurant, to celebrate your birthday. You want to do *TGIFridays*?”

I smiled and nodded. We headed back to Ebony’s car and drove to *TGIFridays*. While we were waiting for our waiter, I blurted out: “How are you and mom sisters? I’ve never met two people more different in my life.”

My aunt laughed and shrugged. She murmured. “Isn’t our waiter just the cutest thing?”

A short, muscular, pecan colored boy with a shaved head approached our table. After he got out orders, he winked at us. I turned my inquisitive eyes right back to my aunt.

“My mother and I never talk. Sometimes, I feel bad because I see other girls who are best friends with their mothers. It’s like my mother and I are enemies in the same house. What was she like when she was a teenager? Did she have any fun?”

“Fun? Girl, please. When she was 15, our father went to New York to work. He was supposed to send for Mama, but he met another woman and got married to

her, and soon after, our mother got sick from pancreatic cancer. Joan had to grow up and take care of everything with the money that he sent to Guadeloupe.”

“So, life was rough for her?”

“Yep. After our mother passed, he did finally send for us and we came all the way to Brooklyn to get treated like shit by his new wife. She already had a 20 year old daughter by that time, a fucking bitch, and they had a baby son, who he treated a whole lot better than us. She did manage to graduate from high-school, but right after, she left to be with your father.”

“She never talks about my father, even when I ask her about him.”

“Your father was abusive. One minute he was kissing her and taking her out and promising her a ring and marriage and everything she could want. The next day, she would be black and blue. When she got pregnant, she thought things would get better, but he ended up leaving for good before you were born. I don’t think she has even recovered from all of it. She just works now.”

“Yea, she works too much.” I drifted inside my thoughts for a while. I was picking at my food. When I looked up, Evelyn had already finished her meal, she was studying me intently.

“You know, I can’t change my sister, but I am always here for you. Come on, sweetheart, let’s get home.”

It was a Saturday in late August, and Nostrand Avenue was busy and bustling at mid-afternoon. There were people everywhere, walking with their children, friends, and lovers. The heat from the late August sun produced a sticky feeling on my skin. I got a whiff of rice, beans, and plantain from the open shop of a Jamaican restaurant along with loud Dancehall music. Elephant Man made me want to dance in the street, but I just bopped my head and keep it moving. One car blared the latest Jay Z song. The cacophony of music and laughter and voices made me feel jubilant. It felt like the whole world had conspired to be perfect, just for my pleasure. And I looked amazing, for once. I had just stepped out of the nail salon and patted my head to ease the itchiness of the synthetic hair braided on my scalp. I stopped at one shop window, as if I was examining something, but really just anxious to check myself out. Looking at my form in the window, checking out the slope of my back in the tight hot pink t- shirt I had on, checking to see if my ass looked bigger than usual in the jeans that I purchased yesterday, two sizes smaller than what I was used to wearing. “Wow, I’m a size 14 now. After all of that hard work. I can’t believe it. I will never be a size 16 ever again!” I put lip-gloss over my full lips and admired my freshly waxed eyebrows. I smiled. I forgot about the people in the store, and the people passing in the busy street. This is what I had wanted to see for six months now.

“Don't worry, sweetheart. You don't need to look in the mirror. You looking real good, sweetheart.”

I laughed and looked over my shoulder at the tall man who was giving my new body a once over. When I looked at him more closely, I realized that he was the man from the New Year's Party. He stepped to me and touched my arm. His big, hazel eyes were penetrating. His long, black dreadlocks were tied back in a pony-tail.

“Wassup, baby. Do you remember me?”

I was not used to this attention but I pretended that it was nothing for this man to be so fully interested in me. I didn't know why I could not pass him by, as I would any other man. As if I had never met him before. I was the one who was usually waiting for a friend who was being flirted with. I was never the desired. His eyes were holding me. I replied, “Of course. What's your name again?”

“Raphael.”

I liked the way he said his name, with his lips pursed like he was about to indulge me with a special treat. His skin was caramel and his mouth was wide. His lips were huge-- sausage like. He had a hard look about him, like he had lived a life without luxuries. An earthy scent, mixed with soap, clung to his skin. His eyes were hard, but his smile was open and pleasing. He was at least eight or nine years older than my sixteen, but there was something about his eyes that, for a second, wouldn't let me turn away, dismiss him. He noticed my hesitation and moved as if to walk with me. I smirked at him and tried to move away. I figured anyone that made me feel like this, tongue-tied, was probably nothing but trouble.

“Hmm, Raphael. I think I like that name. Listen, I have to go.” I walked quickly away.

“Why are you running?” he asked as he started to match my pace. “Are you afraid that I might bite?” His gravelly voice got under my barrier.

“I’m not afraid that you’ll bite me. Maybe I will be the one to bite you.”

Raphael started chuckling and it seemed for a second that he wouldn’t stop.

“Bye!” he yelled as I made my get-away.

When I walked into the front doors of my high-school, in early September, on the first day of my senior year, I walked in a way I had never done before. I didn’t walk with my head down. I didn’t feel insecure. I strutted. For the first time, I didn’t look at other girls. I didn’t care about their curves. I didn’t care about their clothes. For the first time, I got up the nerve to buy some cute clothes that flattered the new me. In Rainbow, in Old Navy, in all the little stores I wandered into on Flatbush Ave, I admired my frame in beautiful tops and skin tight tee-shirts. My stomach was so much smaller. It was only one size down, but I felt like a new person. Even my mother had given me money, with a rare smile a week before classes began. “Tahaj, I’m so proud of you. You really looking good. Keep it up. Don’t get back big again.”

People were shocked. Angela, a girl I knew from my sophomore English class, stopped when she saw me in the hallway. “Wow Tahaj, you look good, girl. You’ve lost some weight. How did you do it? You need to let me know.”

“Thanks girl, I just worked out and ate less. I was just ready to make a change.”

I ducked into the bathroom and looked at myself again. My hair was immaculately braided and I had on a skin-tight pair of jeans, a red tee shirt and red Converse. When I headed to my first class, Health, I sat down next to Chante. I hadn’t seen her for a month. She had spent the last month in Atlanta visiting her aunt Jazzmine

“Ow!,” Chante exclaimed when she saw me. “You lost more weight? So you were really serious weren’t you? I’m happy for you. Now you are definitely coming to the next school party with me.” We hugged. Fifteen minutes into the class, a tall, dark-skinned guy came in.

“Sorry I’m late,” he murmured, and took the only available seat, the one behind me.

“Have a seat, sir. Introduce yourself.” Mrs. Joseph demanded.

“My name is Ron. This is my first day here, and I got lost.”

Chante winked at me when she saw him. “He’s a cutie,” she whispered soundlessly. For the rest of the class period, I felt his presence behind me.

At the first party of the school year, on the last Saturday of September, I wore a cute leopard print shirt, a pair of jeans, big gold hoops and some sandals. Chante

wore a lace shirt, jeans and some black patent leather high heels. We were sitting on a bench talking when Ron walked in. Immediately everyone's mood changed. In less than a month, Ron had managed to become known by everyone. He was tall and his body was just a work of art. He had broad shoulders and a slim muscular physique. His skin was pitch black and smooth. Ron's face was perfectly chiseled, and he was effortlessly confident. His self-love oozed out of every pore, made people flock to him. Girls wondered who would be his first girlfriend, and guys gathered around him everywhere he graced his presence. On my way back from the bathroom while I was heading towards Chante, to my utmost surprise, I saw Ron walking in my direction. He stopped right in front of me.

"You're in my Health class, right? With Mrs. Joseph?"

"Yea. I am," I replied as smoothly as possible. I smiled and subtly batted my lashes, searching for something to say.

"You looking real cute today, miss. What's your name again?"

"It's Tahaj. Tahaj-Marie."

"Hmm. You looking kinda cute tonight, Tahaj. Do you want to dance?"

"Umm... sure."

I quickly glanced over at Chante, and she was staring at me and Ron incredulously. Chante's mouth was opened and one of her eyebrows was raised.

For song after song, Ron and I danced energetically to the Dancehall music playing. After about fifteen minutes, Angel, a voluptuous, pretty, brown-skinned Dominican girl with long, curly hair came up and tapped Ron on the shoulder. “Ron,” she whined. “Are you going to ignore all the other beautiful girls here? I’ve been waiting to dance with you all night!”

He smiled at me apologetically. Right before he turned around, he winked at me and blew me a small kiss. “Angel, baby! I’m so sorry that I kept you waiting.”

Feeling victorious, I sashayed back over to Chante. She was grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Hmm. Somebody just danced with the sexiest boy in school just now. I’m so jealous,” Chante gushed.

“Jealous for what? He might have danced with me out of pity,” I replied, self-effacingly.

“Shit. I wish he would dance with *me* out of pity!” Chante laughed. “He is so fine. He’s just my type. He’s lucky that I already have a man.” Chante spoke with her eyes glued to Ron.

“He’s cute, yeah.”

“Uh oh, Monae’s upset,” Chante hissed. I turned around to see Monae stomping towards the table with fire in her eyes.

“I’m out of here. I’m so tired of these ignorant ass boys in this school.”

“What happened?” Chante and I asked in unison.

“I’m out of here, just out of here.” Monae screamed as she stormed out with her clutch and her jacket.

“Should we follow her?” I asked Chante.

“Damn, Tahaj. We just got here not too long ago. I want to enjoy the party.”

“I’m gonna go after her. You can stay and enjoy the party if you want.” I grabbed my stuff and ran out after her. “Monae, wait,” I called.

Monae walked quickly out of the building and didn’t stop until she was almost at the end of the block of the school. She didn’t turn around. She didn’t move an inch in my direction. She just stood there with her shoulders heaving. When I reached her, I put my arm around her, and she started shaking.

“Come on, let’s find somewhere to eat and talk.”

At a diner, two blocks from our school, Monae sat with her head in her hands for a moment. I let her calm down. She picked listlessly at her order of French fries. When she looked up, she had tears in her eyes.

“I’m just so sick and tired of the disrespect. Sometimes I don’t even know how to feel about men. I thought Lawrence was different. You know me and Lawrence been talking for like two months” She stopped and looked at me. I nodded. “And he’s been telling me that he wants us to be together. He wants us to be a couple. He told me that he loves everything about me. That’s what he’s been telling me. So tonight, we dancing together and he introduced me to some guy that goes to

another school. And the guy told him, right in front of me ‘She’s pretty for a dark girl.’ I got so angry, so I told myself let me back up before I curse out this boy that supposed to be my man’s friend. When I was walking away to get a drink, he said ‘All these pretty light skinned chicks in this school, and you can only get this chick?’ And Lawrence told him, ‘Man, she not my girl or nothing. She’s just somebody for right now.’ That’s when I just got pissed off, and I had to leave.”

“Why do you care about those guys? Forget Lawrence and that other guy.”

“Tahaj, I slept with him. We were supposed to be together. I thought he cared about me. How can he let that guy say shit about me and not even defend me? I’m so tired about hearing this bullshit about my skin color. I look good. I look better than a lot of light skinned girls. And every time I have to deal with these self-hating little boys who don’t think twice about disrespecting me about my skin color. I’m dark and I know it. But my mother has always told me to know how beautiful I am, and never let anyone tell me differently.”

“So what are you going to do now about Lawrence?”

“I’m done. I’m done with him. If a guy is going to act different around his friends, then he does not deserve me. I thought I loved him, but he just surprised me. If I stay with him, or try to be with him, he’s only going to continue to disrespect me.”

“Monae, you do deserve so much more. You are so beautiful to me, and your skin just makes you even more beautiful.”

“Yea, well you should tell that to Lawrence and that dude. Come on, let’s get out of here. And thank you so much for being a real friend.”

“I’m always here for you, Monae.”

On Monday, Chante and I were standing outside the classroom waiting for Health class to begin. I had dressed up a little, in a pretty pink top that showed a little bit of cleavage, hoping to catch Ron’s eye again that day. Chante was dressed in her usual tee-shirt and jeans. When Ron came down the hallway, I straightened my back and pushed out my chest. Maybe this was my time to shine.

“Hey, Tahaj. How you doing today?” He gave me a cool, friendly smile.

“I’m good,” I responded, flashing the biggest smile I could and subtly jutting my upper body towards him.

“That’s cool.” Ron angled his body away from me, and looked over Chante appreciatively. She giggled and smiled. My heart dropped. My chest dropped too.

“Why, hello there,” he murmured flirtatiously. “You’re Chante right?”

“Yessir. Can I help you?” Chante gave him a look that was a cross between being coquettish and having a bad attitude.

“I think you can. I already noticed you. No disrespect, but you are one of the prettiest girls that I have ever seen. You are the definitely the cutest girl at this school. You’re beautiful.”

Chante glanced at me for the briefest of seconds. Her eyes read: “You hear that Tahaj? I’m the cutest girl at this school. You better sit down and know your place.”

She stared at Ron defiantly. “Don’t you think I already know that?”

He laughed. “I’m sure you do. But I thought that I had to tell you, so you can say you heard it from my mouth. Do you have a man?”

“What’s it to you? “

“I need to know who I got to knock out of the running to get to take you on a date.”

“I don’t have anyone special in my life at the moment.” Her nose twitched, just a little.

“Good, so all you have to do is give me your number, and I will pick you up on Friday night.”

As Chante recited her digits, I walked into class, fighting the urge to cry. I could get over Ron, but couldn’t get over the embarrassment. I felt like Ron had used me to push up to Chante. I felt like I must have truly lost my mind, to think that that guy would have liked me. Chante knew that she had won.

I fixed my shirt and sat down in the back of a class, wiping away a tear.

I had almost forgotten about him when I saw him standing on a street corner, on my way home from school. He walked in front of me, impeding any thought of a get-away. My mind was occupied by my humiliating experience with Ron and Chante. I just wanted to get home and cry. I nodded politely towards him. Quietly, I allowed him to walk me around the corner, to my apartment building on Clarkson Ave. I knew my mother was at work, but for some reason, I was so nervous that I imagined my mother perched at the window, her hawk eyes spotting this man moving in on her daughter.

“Hi, miss. You look a little sad today. What’s wrong?”

“I’m... fine. Just having a bad day.” Of course, I could never tell him what was really wrong.

“This is Raphael, sweetie. You can always talk to me. So what’s wrong with Tahaj? That name is like poetry, and it matches you.” He smiled. “You know what? I have an idea. Why don’t I get us some food? I don’t live too far from here, and we can chill and talk.”

We walked a few blocks to a Chinese restaurant and ordered French fries and chicken wings. He picked up a bottle of soda from the corner store. Eight minutes later, when we reached the inside of his apartment, I was noticeably nervous. His apartment was small, but clean. The first thing he did when he closed the door was set the food down and gave me a tour of the apartment. We entered into a hallway that went down the length of the apartment and ended in the living room.

Off to the side of his hallway was his bright kitchen. He walked me down the hallway and pointed out the bathroom. When we got to the living room, he opened the door to his bedroom, which held a huge king sized bed inside. There was framed drawings and paintings on the wall. He fixed each of us a plate, and a glass of Sprite. I sat in the armchair, as far away as I could from him. We studied each other for a moment while we ate. When I couldn't take the weight of his eyes on me, I looked at the paintings on the wall.

“Where did you get those paintings? Who painted those?”

“I did,” he replied simply, in an attempt to be modest.

“What? You did that? How is that possible?”

“I did the drawings. I did the paintings. At one time, I even worked in Manhattan, doing caricatures of people for twenty bucks, but I got sick of it, so I stopped.”

“Maybe you can do a picture of me.” I smiled.

“Maybe. One day soon, if we become good friends, Miss Tahaj.”

“Where are you from?”

“I was born in Jamaica, but my mother sent me here to live with my aunt when I was real young. Five, I think.”

“Where in Jamaica?”

“St. Andrew.”

“You sure you not from Kingston?” I exclaim.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just that everyone I know from Jamaica say they are from Kingston.”

He laughs and shrugs. “Where are you from?”

“I just moved out here to Flatbush. I used to live in East New York. I was born in Brooklyn, but both of my parents are from Guadeloupe.”

“Hmm, ok. I got some buddies over there. In East New York, I mean.”

At nine, I knew that I had to get home before my mother did. I let Raphael walk me part of the way.

“Which one is your building?”

“It’s that one,” I pointed to the third building on the block. “But I will be alright from here. Ok?”

He sighed dramatically, to my delight.

“Ok, Miss Tahaj-Marie. Can I get your number?” He gave me a boyish smile.

“Why should *I*, as cute as I am, give *you* my number?” I faked a confidence that I knew would probably be short-lived.

He laughed again. “Well, you came to my house and we had a good vibe, so I know that you are feeling me. I want to see you again.”

I smile back. “Ok. I’m going to save your number as Rachel, just in case my mom goes through my phone.”

A week later, the second time that we hung out, I snuck out of my house to meet with him. Late night conversations with my door locked had inspired me to make the next step. My mother was doing overtime, and wouldn’t be back home until 7 in the morning. As I unlocked the door, I could imagine her exclaiming, “Men are not worth nothing. Focus on your education!” What would she think of this twenty-six year old man? On his street, in front of his building, I stood nervously, waiting for him to meet up with me. It was 11:30 at night and teenagers were milling about, some smoking, some flirting, others screaming. Eventually, I saw him coming down the stairs. He hugged me, and we walked to his apartment.

That time, we just sat on his couch and we talked all night. We were watching TV when suddenly he said: “You want to know something about me?”

“What?” I asked with an eyebrow raised.

“My mother was fourteen when I was born.”

“Fourteen?” I ask incredulously.

“Yes, baby, fourteen, going on fifteen.”

“My grandmother gave my mother the licking of her life when she found out. She worked all night cleaning at a hospital. So imagine when she came home one morning from work to find her youngest daughter vomiting away her morning sickness, and her sister up worrying.”

”What’s your mother’s name?”

“My mother’s name is Dawn, and her sister’s name is Lisa. She’s four years older, so she was eighteen at the time. My aunt had to restrain my grandmother from damn near killing her. After the beating, she shook her and just kept asking the same questions over and over.” He got up and put his hand on his masculine hip and cried in a mocking Jamaican accent.

“Dawn, who da father, Dawn? Weh him deh?”

He imitated a devastated little girl.

“ ‘Me nah know, man, me nah know.’ My aunt told me that she just cried and cried in a heap on the floor.”

Raphael went to sit on the couch and I put my head in his lap. He continued stroking my braids. “My grandmother was such a strong Christian. She went to work every day and spent her weekends in church. But you know, them religious types are the worst ones. She was ashamed. And she was angry.”

“So what happened?”

“My mother went to live with her grandmother in the countryside, until she had me. My great-grandmother birthed me. And then she took care of me when my mother went back to the town.”

“Who was your father?”

His eyes flashed a little. “My father was some muthafuckin’ dreamer. He wanted to be a track-star. He wanted to be a deejay. He wanted to be a hitman. He wanted to be everything, but all he ended up being was a guy who stood on the street and made babies. He had the good luck to be handsome. So he found women to take care of him, one after the other.”

“So why did he mess with your mom? She couldn’t take care of him at fourteen.”

“My mother was just good-looking. She had the fortune to be high yellow, what they called a browning. She didn’t have to bleach even though her mother and her sister did. And she had body for days from the time she was born. My aunt would tell me that my grandmother worried about her being too attractive. Trouble was just bound to happen.”

“So you never met your father?”

“I met him once, when I was around 15. I was living in Brooklyn with my aunt by that time. I went back to Jamaica to see him, but he didn’t say much to me. He didn’t acknowledge me. Some angry, jealous woman ended up killing him when I was nineteen.”

I looked at him for a long time, I felt sorry for him. We watch movies for the rest of the night, and he managed to keep his hands off of me. Now, my body wanted him to touch me.

When I got up to leave, at 6 a.m. he cornered me by the door. He gave me a bear hug, and then we looked into each other's eyes. When he kissed me, I felt my body grow weak. He held onto my hips, and rubbed my behind. His hands moved up and down my waist until he was touching my breasts. His hands moved inside my shirt. "You're so beautiful. I love every inch of you." I moved his hands back down and kept my hold around his waist. I felt a little dizzy. He asked if I was okay, and I nodded and told him that I had to get home.

That time, I managed to sneak back into my house without my mother knowing that I had ever left. Fifteen minutes after I walked in, my mother came and went straight to bed. I stood in my mirror, touching my breasts. Before he left to walk back to his apartment, he told me that he wanted to see me again, take me out somewhere. I nodded, and walked inside.

Two months into the school year, the college counselor Mrs. Ross requested a meeting with me. I went in, not knowing quite what to expect. Every senior underwent this meeting, where we worked out what our plans were and what our expectations should be. Mrs. Ross was a tall, brown-skinned curvaceous woman, with long braids, who liked to wear bright pink lipstick.

“Hello, Tahaj,” she murmured, with a warm smile.

“Hello, Mrs. Ross. How are you?”

“I’m fine. I brought you in to speak with me because I wanted to know more about your plans for college. It seems that you have been an excellent student.”

“For right now, I want to be an English teacher. I love reading. I love to write. Honestly, I want to leave Brooklyn. I think I am ready for a change. I was thinking of going to a SUNY school, and applying for a few of the private schools in upstate New York. My dream would be to go to Cornell, or maybe Syracuse. I heard about the EOP and HEOP programs, and I thought that maybe I had a chance to get into Cornell through the HEOP program.”

“Well, Cornell doesn’t accept everyone, but with your record, you might be able to make it in with HEOP. My advice to you is to start the process early, and to come visit me as often as possible. I don’t want someone with your talent and potential to go to waste in any way. How many people live in your household? We need to find out if you qualify economically right away.” She showed me a chart with two rows describing the highest family income compared to family size needed in order to qualify for the program.

“Well, for right now, it’s only my mother and I. She works very hard, but I don’t think she makes more than this amount.” I pointed to the financial amount that could not be exceeded for a two person family.

“Okay, what you need to do is bring proof of your mother’s income and start working on a personal statement for these applications. I see you already took the SAT, so you are on your way, girl. I have a special interest in you, Tahaj. With your promise, I really want to see you succeed. Come back to me next week.”

We smiled, exchanged our goodbyes and I left, feeling optimistic about my future.

November. I was laying on Raphael’s couch, while he was pacing around. He was agitated, muttering to himself, sitting down, and then jumping up every few minutes. Suddenly he turned to me.

“I want to draw you. I think you’re going to be my biggest muse.”

“You know how to draw?”

“Yes, beautiful.” As he studied my face, he told me about how he learned to draw.

“I learned to draw by accident. An art teacher wanted us to do a self-portrait. So I did one. I tried to reach inside and portray the man inside of me. I was what 12, 13? I got an A on the assignment. My teacher was impressed. And after that, every time I was sad or mad or feeling vicious I would draw. It felt like drawing kept my feelings under control. The whole school knew about me. I was respected because of my art.”

He showed me the first few lines that he had drawn. “First, I just make some light quick lines. Then I darken the lines when I’m sure of what facial expression I want you to be in. Then I add in the features, and the hair... like this.” He gave me the image that he had drawn of me. He had captured my face the way it looked in the moment before I smiled. The corners of my mouth were upturned, and my eyes sparkled.

His promises came pre-maturely and were frequent. I hoped with all of my heart that they were not insubstantial. I believed them. “I think I am falling in love already. I want you to be my world,” he said. “If you became my girl, nothing will tear us apart,” he said. And I believed him.

We had not talked much about it, but the question was in the air. It was in every look he gave me. It was in the way he touched my body until I had to remind him to stop. I was a virgin and we had agreed to wait for a while. It happened in December. There wasn’t a plan. We hadn’t agreed that that would be the night. My mom thought that I was with Monae. I had used Monae as a cover over and over to be with Raphael.

Raphael was on his bed, shirtless, with sweats hanging off his waist. His hair was spread out on his pillows. As I came out of the bathroom, his lips pursed, his eyes narrowed, and he looked me up and down. I was fully clothed, but I felt vulnerable and naked. Raphael beckoned me to him and I had no power but to

come. Holding me steady with his two light eyes he leaned up and kissed me and caressed my cheek bone. He tugged on my braided hair as I stared back into his gaze.

“Who did this to you?” he asked with a perplexed look marring his face.

“My home girl braided my hair yesterday. Why you acting like you don’t like my hair? I had this same style when you met me....”

He sighs, “Tahaj, you would look beautiful with some locks. You would be a queen. Why don’t you try them? Don’t you always talk about wanting to start them?”

“I know, but I don’t want to look crazy for a year,” I say.

He runs his hands down my scalp. “Forget that. Do it now. When they lock you won’t regret it. You have a good texture for it, y’ know?”

I touch one of his locs. “Beautiful,” I murmur.

“Like you?” Looking steady into my eyes.

I suck my teeth, and roll my eyes. Raphael got up and gently sucked the skin of my neck. “I love your big, fat lips,” he says, as he kisses me. “And I love your big, beautiful eyes. I love your eyebrows.” He ran his hands over my eyebrows and caressed my chin. “I love your hips, and I love your thighs and I love you here and here...” he said, putting his hands on the subsequent body parts.

I sighed and I undid the hair that I sat through two hours of torture for. I washed it into a cute curly fro.

“Are you ready?” he whispered to me while I laid in his arms, running my fingers through my newly freed hair.

“Yes, I’ve been ready.”

“You sure?”

“I love you. I know it’s only been a few months but I know now. There is no one else that I want. Who else can it be, but you?”

That night, when I was with him, my body let me know what my mind was slowly accepting. I wanted him. When he entered me, the pain of it is almost equaled by the pleasure. We fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms. When I woke up, he was lying quietly, and knew the instant my eyes opened. He kissed me.

“Are you okay? Are you in any pain?”

“I think I’m fine. I feel a little sore.”

“I’m going to make breakfast for you, beautiful. Is pancakes, eggs, and bacon okay for you?” I nodded.

“I think we should go out to Nostrand Ave. I know a good place where we can get you started.” After we showered, we hopped on a bus. In the tiny salon, a few people looked up to acknowledge us. Raphael stepped in and started to greet the

hairstylists. He beckoned a voluptuous woman in a black tank top and jeans and gave her a quick, affectionate hug. I felt tense watching Raphael pay attention to someone else, especially a woman who was so beautiful and shapely. I told myself to chill out and wrapped my arms around myself.

“Barbara. She wants to start some locks. Can you put some twists in her hair?”

Barbara looked at me for a second with a smirk. Then she half-smiled.

“Is your hair clean?” I nodded. “Well it doesn’t matter, I’ll wash it anyway. Head to the back and sit down in the chair.”

Barbara washed my hair and then sat me in her styling chair. Raphael stood outside talking to guys on the street while she twisted my hair into tiny coils. She didn’t say a word to me. When she was done, she asked me if he was paying, and then she knocked on the glass and beckoned to Raphael.

“Forty,” she barked. Raphael gave her two twenties, and we left.

When I got home that night, my mother was sitting up waiting for me. I had not been home for the past two days. I looked at her face and knew that I couldn’t use Monae as an excuse this time. She was deadly still and deathly quiet. As soon as I closed the door, she sprung up like someone set on fire.

“Tahaj, what in the world... What the fuck did you do to your hair? Where have you been? Tahaj? Look at me. Where have you been going? I saw Monae’s mother at the grocery store and she said that you have not been to the house to

spend the night. In fact, she said you haven't spent the night for months now. I felt like a straight up fool."

"I- I was just hanging with another friend of mine."

She slapped me over and over again. Each slap was more vicious than the last.

"Don't lie to me. I know you're fucking. I know you're fucking Tahaj. You're out on the streets all the time and you think I don't know? I found condoms in a bag in your room. Don't you know that men only bring babies and STD's? Huh, you stupid girl!"

I pushed her away and ran into my room, which had been violated by the curiosity and anger of my mother. Before I could properly slam the door, my mother stuck her skinny little arm and held the door open.

"Listen to me, Tahaj. My friend Sherlene said she saw you with a man on the train one day. She said that you didn't see her, but she saw you. She said the man has dreadlocks and he looked about thirty."

"So what, you have your friends spying on me now? How is this any business of yours? I thought that I couldn't get a man?"

"I don't know where you found this man, but if I ever find out who this motherfucker is, I will call the police on him, Tahaj. Just mark my words."

“Just because no one wants you, you want to stop me from living my life? Just because my father left you, you want to get in the way of me being in love?”

For the briefest of seconds, my mother’s eyes showed some pain, but then she hardened her face again.

“You are dumber than a bag of rocks, Tahaj. This man will only take advantage of you. Do not come crying to me when he does.”

“He loves me. He loves me more than you do. He treats me better than you treat me.”

“You don’t know what love is. Not at all. When you get a disease, don’t come to me. I will tell you to pack your bags.”

Besides spending time with Raphael, applying for colleges took up much of my time. Even though most of the people I knew wanted to stay in New York City, I dreamed of getting out of my mother’s house, and having my own life. I applied to schools in upstate New York, Syracuse University, University at Albany, Binghamton University. Cornell was my first choice.

In January, I noticed that my period was one month late. I never had any late periods. Every second or third week of every month, from the age of eleven, I have been through the pain of being born with a uterus. I felt scared. My body was changing. Bad smells made me sick. I became easily tired, when I used to be

full of energy. My breasts were so tender, they feel like they had just started growing.

I knew. I knew before I went to the Rite Aid on Utica Ave and spend my last couple of bucks on a pregnancy test. I knew before I started buying menstrual pads and throwing them away, unused, to fool my mother, only to buy some more time. I knew before I go on late night binges through my refrigerator. I knew before I felt the first roundness of my stomach poke through my shirt. And the mounting terror that comes from knowing fucks with me and made me vomit easier than the pregnancy itself.

All of January, I woke up in the middle of the night, sweat wetting my bed. I was afraid. College, boyfriends, my future. I knew that my dreams were gone, or at least put on hold.

I called him up and tried not to let the anxiety show in my voice. I tried to act like I used to. Think like I used to. I wanted to be the girl from two months before. Horny and just going to fuck my man. But with each step I mounted in his apartment building to 3B, the horrible feelings in the pit of my stomach dropped lower and lower until I almost tripped over it before I reached his door.

I smiled casually when he poked his head through the door and we embraced. He walked behind me, like he had always done. He patted me on my behind.

“You getting a little thick there, baby,” he said and pressed his lips to my collarbone. He pressed himself into my back. I knew that he wanted me. I turned

around, unzipped my jacket and pulled up my t-shirt. I turned to the side. There was no denying it.

“You’re pregnant? But... I thought you were taking those pills?”

I fix my clothes. “I’m not even sure what happened. I wasn’t taking them properly, I guess. But I think we can do this. We can do this, baby. Right? We can do this.”

The gruffness of his voice grated me raw. “I’m a grown man. You think I have time to be taking care of a baby with a baby? I told you. I *told* you, that I didn’t want children.”

“I wasn’t a baby when you were fucking with me!” The tears came. I was uncontrollable.

“You can cry but you might as well keep crying on your way to the clinic.”

“Please, Raphael. Don’t be like this.”

His last words were as final as a guillotine’s blade. “Please, Tahaj. Get an abortion.”

He put his hand against my back and gently guided me out. The door slammed. Almost against my back. I felt myself falling from the shock of it. I slid down the wall next to his door and collapsed in a heap on the dirty, colorless carpeting in the hallway. The crude smells of piss and garbage and semen and excrement and

eggs and rice and peas didn't affect me. Raphael opened the door, locked it and stepped over my heaving body. His harsh words replayed in my mind.

I had begged. My hands had held onto his slim hips, and my face had been upturned to his. He is my sun, my everything, I thought. I can't live without him.

I'm not even sure how I got back home. My feet moved and I went through the motions of getting back on the bus, getting off at the right stop, and walking home. In my room, I lied there cupping my stomach. There's a baby in here. I'm pregnant. I knew that this could be one of the consequences of my actions, but I never thought it would happen to me. I deliberated over getting an abortion to remain in a relationship with Raphael.

During our lunch session at school, I ran around looking for Monae. I found her alone in the library, studying for a test. I sat down and burst into tears.

"Tahaj, what's wrong?"

"I need to talk to you in private."

"Monae. I need you. I'm pregnant for Raphael, and he said he's going to leave me if I don't get an abortion. I think I need to get an abortion."

"Do you want to get an abortion, or do you *need* one?"

"I am in love, for the first time. I don't want to lose him. I can't have a baby right now anyway. My mom would kill me."

“This is not something to do without thinking. You might regret this for the rest of your life. Think about it. If you’re sure you want to do it, we can skip class and handle it sometime next week. Use your head, Tahaj. You say you’re in love with him, and you want to get an abortion for him, but if this relationship was real, he would be supporting you. You would be talking to him about this and not me. It’s not real love if as soon as you get pregnant, he turns cold on you.”

“I know, Monae. You have a point. Maybe he is just surprised right now, and this is the way he is reacting.”

“Yea... sure. And how did you get pregnant anyway? Were you not using condoms?” Monae’s eyebrow raised.

“I wasn’t on birth control. I wanted to get started but I was scared my mother was going to find out about it. We were using condoms, but we didn’t use condoms a few times because I thought I was in a safe zone.”

“You know better than that, Tahaj. Anyway, no matter what, I am here for you”

“I need you. Right now, I feel like I have no one else to turn to.” I started to cry again.

That night I went home and I called Raphael. He didn’t answer the phone. Five minutes later, my heart sank when he didn’t pick up again.

“Monae, I think I want to do this. I have to do this.”

“Ok. Let’s plan to go on Friday. I know that there is a Planned Parenthood Center in Boro Hall on Court Street. Let’s meet at the train station on Nostrand and take the train out there.”

On Friday, Monae’s smile lit up the whole station. She gave me a hug and her petite frame felt firm and strong. At that moment, she felt like my life line. I had no one else to turn to. Chante and I had not talked since she started dating Ron. We hopped on the Manhattan bound 4 train. On the hard, plastic orange seat, I felt self-conscious. Every time someone glanced at me, I imagined them glaring at me. I imagined them standing up and pointing a finger at me. I imagined myself dressed as Hester Prynne, a scarlet ‘A’ burned into my shoulder. My ‘A’ would not stand for adultery; it would stand for ‘abortion’. I was on my way to kill my baby in hopes of keeping the man who I felt loved me. Inside of the Planned Parenthood Center, there were images of smiling families and babies.

The woman at the front desk was a heavy-set coffee-brown woman, and she smiled warmly at me when I walked through the door. I felt awkward and ill at ease. My body was overly warm and sweating.

“How may I help you, dear?” the woman asked as she glanced at me from top to bottom.

“I think I want to get an abortion.”

“Okay. Do you have health insurance?”

“I do, but I don’t have my medical card on me.”

“Is this your first abortion? How many months pregnant are you?”

“Yes, it is. I think I am about 4 weeks pregnant.”

“Ok sweetheart, fill out this paper work and we will have you meet with our counselor when you are finished,” she slid a sheath of papers towards me.

“I have to speak to a counselor?”

“Yes, don’t worry, she is wonderful. Her name is Mrs. Rubenstein, and she will talk to you about the procedure and what to expect. This is just our way to make sure that you are psychologically prepared.”

Monae and I walked to a waiting room and I sat down and started to go through the paperwork. Halfway through the paper work, my body started to shake. I got up and found a bathroom and around the corner and splashed water on my face. I lifted my shirt up quickly and looked up my stomach, which looked rounder than usual. Outside of the bathroom, Monae was waiting for me, holding both of our bags. She handed me my black satchel and whispered in my ear “Are you okay? What’s wrong with you?”

“Monae, I don’t think I can do this. Maybe you were right. I keep thinking the same thing over and over. This is my body, this is my baby.”

“I won’t judge you, no matter what decision you make. Maybe you need to lay out the pros and cons of this.”

“I’m sorry for dragging you out here, but I won’t be able to make it through this. My mind is made up. I know I won’t have Raphael’s support or my mother’s

support either. Maybe they will come around. But I know what I want now. This is my body and my baby. The survival of my baby is more important than anything else. I don't think I can love with myself if I killed my baby."

"What about college?"

"Whatever school I get into, I will try to ask them to defer my admission for a year, while I figure out what to do."

I ripped up the form, put on my coat and went back to the desk. The woman at the desk looked at me with question marks in her eyes, and I shook my head.

"I changed my mind about the abortion."

"Okay, sweetie. No worries, many women change their mind about things. You have time to consider your options. Planned Parenthood also offers pre-natal care services, which you need for a healthy pregnancy. You can schedule a pre-natal meeting if you've decided that you want to follow through with your pregnancy. If you need any help with anything, you know where to find us."

I scheduled a pre-natal meeting for the following week and Monae and I headed home.

Two: Amir

My mother was one of the most perceptive people I have ever known. She could smell a lie like a cat could smell a mouse. She could see the lie in my eyes before I had even worked up the nerve to get it out. My mother was also a light sleeper.

As January passed into February, my breasts grew and were tender to the touch. Every morning at around 4:30, my stomach revolted against me, and I had to run to the bathroom, painfully dry heaving until I vomited. I knew that there was no way that she had never heard the bouts of “morning” sickness that hit me at all times of the day. I tried to be discreet. I tried to quietly vomit, but there was no way, of course, to quietly vomit. There were days when I could barely eat. There were days when I ate like a marathon participant. My mother, of course, was just biding her time.

One morning, when I stepped out of the bathroom, I ended up face to face with my mother. She looked me in the eye with an expression of pure hatred. I knew that she knew. She gave me an evil grin. She looked me up and down. I braced myself for harsh words, for an attack of any sort, verbally or physically. Her face and body had grown even thinner, I realized. I hadn't looked at her so clearly, for so long, in months.

I walked into the apartment and immediately rushed into the bathroom. Monae was behind me.

“Tahaj? Hurry up. I think there is something in the kitchen that you will want to see.” Monae yelled.

On the kitchen table was an envelope with a steak knife through it. I removed the steak knife and examined the letter. “Congratulations,” it read. “We are pleased to announce that you have been accepted into Cornell University.” I handed the letter to Monae. She scanned it, broke into the biggest smile, and hugged me. We did a happy dance around the kitchen, but I got out of breath and sunk into the couch.

“I guess your mom is excited as well.” We laughed for a minute but then my laughter turned into tears.

“I’m sorry, Monae. I keep crying like this almost every day. My hormones have been so out of whack lately. For no reason, I keep crying. My mother and I we are not getting along. I haven’t even heard from Raphael. I feel like some kind of fool. I knew it would be hard when I got my decision from Cornell, but now that it is here, I don’t even know how to feel. I didn’t think it would be this hard. I am making the biggest sacrifice right now. But this is my decision. I am making the best decision for me.”

“You can consider this an early birthday present.”

“I might as well look at it as a birthday present. There won’t be any other gifts coming my way.”

“Tahaj, just know that you were good enough to get into an Ivy League school. That’s amazing. How many of us can say that? Do you think it will be okay for you to defer admission? A lot of people do that, if they have a good reason for it.”

“I hope so. I am going to contact the HEOP director and see what they say. The doctor said that I am due in October. If I started school now, I would end up having a baby in my first semester. I can’t do that. And I don’t want to ask to defer for one semester because I don’t want to start school when Amir is still a baby. If I start next year in August, he will be closer to a year old. It might be easier for me.”

“Tahaj, just take it one day at a time. Even if it takes you longer to finish school, you will still finish. When you want something in life, no one and nothing can stop you. It’s only you that can stop yourself.”

“Look at Chante, parading around with her new boyfriend. What happened to the other guy she was with?”

“I don’t know. I guess the two of them broke up. Chante told me that Ron asked her to go to the prom.”

“Tahaj, are you going to prom with us?”

“Prom?” I snorted. “Monae, I feel huge. I get so tired when I walk. My feet and ankles are bloated. I am not going to anyone’s prom. And you already know that Chante and I are no longer friends. I’m tired of that bitch.”

“Please, Tahaj. You will not be the first or the last to be pregnant at a prom. You still have to live your life. You will regret not going. And you and Chante have to make up eventually.”

“Monae, I don’t have the heart to look for a dress right now with this belly. I know for sure that I’m not going to prom.”

“Okay, Tahaj. Whatever. What are you going to wear for graduation?”

“Did you not hear what I just said? I’m not even thinking about these things right now.”

“Tahaj. You’re pregnant. Does that mean that life is over?”

That weekend, Monae dragged me Flatbush Ave to buy an outfit for graduation. I found a graduation dress, but I refused to even try on a prom dress.

In school, my friends laughed to see me with a hugely pregnant stomach. They exclaimed and rubbed my stomach in class. On June 4th, I don’t go to my prom. I sat at home, watching TV, dreading graduation. I didn’t want to attend graduation, see all the critical eyes of parents. I didn’t want to notice the way people watch me and then share that “who’da thought” look. But sure enough when June 24th rolled around, my indignant mother forced me. The event was—to her—the

culmination of all the hard work I'd put into school from the time I was two. The belly poking out in front of me laughed at it all. My future is uncertain. I was sure that I would lose my identity. I would no longer be Tahaj, I would become the mother of my yet to be born Amir.

When we got home after my graduation, my mother sat on the couch and took a long, hard look at me. "I was so embarrassed today. I wanted to scream. I am so disappointed in you. You went and got pregnant, when you knew the situation we were in."

"Mommy, I am sorry. I did want better for myself. This just happened."

"Just happened? If you were grown enough to open your legs, you are grown enough to prevent this from happening. I am beyond disappointed in you. You got into Cornell and you basically can't go because you got your foolish self pregnant. I know the plan was for me to take care of the baby while you went to school. But honestly, if you think I am going to take care of an infant again at this point in my life, you got another thing coming. You need to apply for welfare if you aren't going to work or go to school. I have a man now. And he is moving in tomorrow. Since you're grown, you need to find a place to be."

My mother got up and went into her room. She slammed the door. I was shocked. I had no idea that my mother had been seeing someone, much less had a man who was ready to move in. The next day, I went with Monae to the welfare office and suffered the shame of applying for welfare, answering all of the social worker's

questions and ignoring her tired, judgmental glances at me. I wondered where in the world my life was going.

On October 16, at 7:32 in the morning, my water broke. I didn't know what to do. The pain was excruciating. My mother woke up to my screams and helped me get dressed in a tee shirt and sweat pants. She called a cab and we rushed to Kings County Hospital. They set me up in a white room with another pregnant woman. There was a curtain pulled between us. In between the pain of our contractions, the woman chatted conversationally with me and my mother.

After twelve hours of excruciating birth, I had a little eight pound baby in the hospital. Amir. He had Raphael's creamy brown skin, and his beautiful brown eyes. My life. My blessing, but also, maybe, my curse. Raphael's face in miniature. I was hypnotized by his soft, curly baby hair that intertwined naturally.

You are my queen, Raphael had whispered to me at night. He had lied. You don't kick a queen out of your apartment and step over her body when you see her sobbing on the floor. For all that Raphael had lectured me and taught me – for all that he had convinced me of his love for me, for all that he was a god in my seventeen year old eyes, he proved to be just a man when he found out that Amir was finally in the world. He was distant and cold. I felt used up emotionally. I felt sick. At eighteen, I felt that I had doubled in age.

I couldn't look at my hair any more. I remember that he had parted my hair and twisted it and told me to love my hair and respect my body. After I had Amir

Raphael Washington, every time I looked at my hair, I imagined his hands twisting it, lecturing me. I remembered how I sweated out my twists under those same hands that evening. That evening represented to me new beginnings. A permanent hairstyle that I couldn't undo, and the loss of my hymen and my innocence that I couldn't retrieve.

Now that I remembered to actually look at my face again, I couldn't keep my mind off the evening and how it changed me, shaped me, given me focus. I had, at one time, lived and breathed for this man. Now, on unlucky days, every man I passed looked like him. I thought I saw him on obscure street corners. Every guy attempting to push up on some girl became him, I hurried with my stroller, thinking, "It wasn't like that with me. He didn't just holler at me like I was some little hood girl."

I woke up at 11 a.m., on March 25th, 2006, feeling like shit. My mother and I had had another fight, and I lived in fear that she was going to kick me out soon. While my 5 month old son lay sleeping in his bassinet, I examined myself in the mirror. I held my breasts, which were heavy now from months of breast feeding. My stomach was distended and there were stretch marks now, where before there had only been smooth skin.

I grabbed a handful of hair and gently pulled. I wanted and needed a change for my own peace of mind. I didn't care what it was, but I knew that I need a fresh new start. I showered and dressed and asked my mother to watch Amir for an hour.

There was a small barber shop two blocks from my house. When I opened the door I was hit with the smell of men's aftershave and cologne. The two men who were getting haircuts looked me up and down, but I ignored them. I paid five dollars for a man to give me a buzz cut. I allowed myself to relax under the buzzing of the hair shaver. When the one year old locks fell in clumps to the floor, I realized that I was detached from them. As I walked out, one man said "I never understand why females do that." I felt free. I felt victorious. When I walked back into the house, bald, my mother's eyes widened. She handed me back my baby and went into her bedroom without saying a word.

I could barely look at my face on some days. And on other days I couldn't stop looking. Was that girl me? It was so strange to see my face, the creamy brown skin, the big dark eyes, long lashes and round lips, with no hair to hide behind. And then, when tufts of hair started to sprout on my head, I died it bright, raging red. A short, unnatural colored `fro, this was my way of defying Raphael and my mother. But my face in the mirror was a stranger.

My mother and I spent days without speaking. She loved Amir, but resented me. We kept our communication to a bare minimum. You know, like "I have to use the bathroom," when the other was in there, or "Excuse me," when I was in her way. Every day that passed before I left for Ithaca, I prayed to God for me to succeed. I didn't want to give up any of my dreams because I was now a mother. I didn't want to give up Tahaj. The days passed and no man made his appearance in our apartment. My mother quietly agreed to watch Amir while I did the summer

program for Cornell's HEOP students. When June rolled around, and it was time for me to head to Cornell for the Pre-Freshman Program I was ecstatic.

Even though I had seen pictures of the campus online, Cornell's huge campus had a cold atmosphere that took some getting used to. The hills took some getting used to as well. Arriving with my suitcase, I instantly felt afraid and alone. I was self-conscious of my tall frame, which had picked up sixty pounds. Forty pounds had come on from the pregnancy with Amir, and twenty with the stress of caring for him, while living with my mother. When I rolled into my dorm room, I breathed a sigh of relief. I wanted to pretend that maybe I was a normal 19 year old, starting college just a tad bit late. I was hoping to make new friends and party and just have no stress, no worries, no diapers, no absent baby father.

My roommate, Marsha, was a slim, pretty, brown-skinned girl who was also from Brooklyn. She was outgoing and loud. In the first few days of classes, she instantly made friends with everyone, which caused our shared room to constantly be filled with people who quickly ignored me when they judged me not cool enough.

After that first week, I spent a lot of time in the main library to avoid the discomfort of the constant party in my room. After I finished my school work I read to waste time. In the second week of the program, I met him. I was in the computer cluster and he sat next to me. For some reason our eyes kept meeting.

Finally, he just introduced himself to me. He was tall, slim, and light skinned, with an angular face, and hazel eyes.

“Hey, wassup. How ya doing? My name is Mike.”

For the first time in a while, I smiled. “Hello, my name is Tahaj-Marie.”

“Are in PFP?”

“Yea I am. I just got here like a week ago. Are you in the program?”

“I just finished my freshman year. I’m taking summer classes right now to make my senior year easier when it does get here. And I want to go abroad soon, so I figured, let me get some stuff out of the way. Hopefully I will get a B+, cause in this school, you bust your butt, and the best you can get sometimes is an A-.

Where are you from?”

“I’m from Brooklyn.”

“Brooklyn!!!”

“Where do you want to go abroad?”

“I’m not sure, but someplace where I will never get the opportunity to go ever again in life. Maybe India, or Hong Kong, or some shit like that.”

We laughed. I felt my heart flutter when I noticed how white his teeth were.

“Well, have you gotten out much? Have you seen the campus, and been out in Collegetown?”

“Not really. I’ve just been focused on doing my work,” I replied.

“Yea, that’s easy to do when you get a ton of it. I think you should come out with me and a small group of us tonight. We’re going to this Asian restaurant that we went to last weekend. I forgot the name of the restaurant, but I’m sure we can find it again, though.”

That night, I could tell that Mike was interested in me. He smiled at me, held the door open for me, and he gave me ideas about what was good to try. The group of us was in high spirits, and I returned to my dorm knowing that I had had a great time. Marsha gasped when I got back in my room at 1 am. I had to turn on my nightlight in order to undress, and she could tell I was dressed a bit more nicely than my usual trips to the library,

“Excuse me, missy. Where were you tonight?”

“I was out with this new guy I met, and some of his friends.”

“Get it girl. I never thought I’d see the day.” I chuckled and turned off the light to go to sleep.

For that whole week, Mike and I sent text messages back and forth. I felt hope that I had made a new friend on campus. On Friday, he invited me to hang out

with him, one on one. I dressed up as cute as I could, in an aqua tank top and a pair of shorts and pink sandals. I wore huge silver hoops. We were in the common room of his dorm watching a movie when my mother called me. At first I ignored her call, but when she called me three times in a row, I picked up. As soon as she heard my voice, she started cursing me out, telling me that Amir missed me and wouldn't stop crying. She kept repeating that she was not his mother, and that time in her life was over. I spoke to Amir on the phone and promised him that I would be home soon. I told him I loved him. When Amir heard my voice, he calmed down.

After the conversation, Mike looked at me with an eyebrow raised. There was a quizzical expression in his eyes.

“Who was that?”

“That was my mom. She's having problems with my son.”

“You have a kid?” His face wrinkled. “How come you never told me?” He shifted his body slightly away from mine.

“I just wasn't ready. I didn't think you needed to know about it right at the moment we met.”

“Shit. Well, when were you going to tell me?”

“Ummm...” Mike got up and started shuffling about.

“Listen. I think I’m about to get ready to study now, anyway. So can we hang out a little bit later??”

For the remaining three weeks of the program, Mike avoided me. When he saw me on campus, he acted like he had never known me. Towards the end of the program, I spotted him with another, blond, love interest. I drifted down into a severe depression, and everyone else who I had gotten friendly with started to avoid me as well. As soon as I returned from my horrible summer at Cornell, I went and applied for Section 8, to try to get my own place to live. I knew that I would not be going back to Cornell.

When my name came up on the list, years later, I moved out with my three year old son.

I ran into him, without expecting it all, on the train station. He looked the same. His body was still strongly built. He looked a little older. His dreads were longer. I glanced at him again and again, until he looked at me in return. His eyes said it all. I was with Amir at the time. I didn’t know what to do. I felt approaching him might mess with my son’s emotions and get his hopes up. On the other hand, I knew that if I didn’t take this chance to approach him, I might never know if Raphael was ready to step up to being a father.

Raphael came to me. He nodded at me and then looked down at Amir.

“So, that’s him?”

“That’s him.”

“How have you been?”

“I’ve been making it all right. Raphael, do you think you’re ready now?”

“You know. Life is a crazy thing. You know how many times I wanted to reach out to you again? I think I’m ready now to give this a chance. I want to give it a shot.”

“Amir,” I said, looking at him, “this is your father, Raphael.”

The 3 train roared by. Amir stared at Raphael. I could tell that he was confused.

“My father?” he whimpered.

Three: Tested

My Amir is a small boy with eyes big as moons. Although he has existed for six years, I am still enamored with him, still find everything he does enchanting. He walks with a manly six year old swagger, talks with a low lisp and analyzes everything perfectly, in terms that are black or white—never in between. When I was growing up with him (cause when I had him at eighteen, I wasn't fully grown myself), I was enthralled with how much he seemed to be a smaller version of his father. People say it all the time about their children, but it was not until I saw the flesh of my flesh put into my arms that I realized how completely, utterly, devastating and miraculous the fact of it is.

I watch them when they think that I'm not. When Raphael comes to bring Amir another video game, I flit around the house, pretending to clean, but sneak looks at them.

The energy they share is almost tangible. When Raphael comes on a weekday to visit his son, I sit there and stare, same large, lovely, light brown eyes, mouth that never could stay closed, lips-luscious and edible and fat. Same masculine faces and wild hair that give them the look of Mustafa and Simba. Same squarish head and hairline, same thick and full eyebrows, long lashes, broad nose, Mickey Mouse ears. Same arrogant way of speaking and aggressive way of walking. Inquisitive to no end. They are both enthralled by their bodies, by woman's bodies. Same short, stubby fingers and toes, same way of having those long introspective moments when nothing you say or do can fully reach them. It's

thrilling to watch them, two men with a generation gap between them, both sitting there playing video games, legs open, in jeans and white tee's—sitting there like they own the world.

They own mine.

There are those rare and achingly beautiful times when Raphael looks up and we connect. His eyes seem to say, to me, at least, “Look at what we made, Taj. Look at what we did- we put a man in this world. We made magic.” And he loses in the video game and makes an unavoidable gap in the conversation and my Amir just sits there and watches us, not intruding the way a child would when they are not the imminent center of attention. And I want to pull Raphael in my arms and touch him, just touch him, see that little birthmark on his upper arms, touch the little ashy place between his thumb and fore-finger, smooth his work-worn palm, inhale his sweaty musk, bask in the calm air that he emanates, but I can't. And for a minute, I let my eyes go soft and... just for a minute... Raphael sees my desire... to just touch him. Make magic again. But I wise up and nod slightly and I hope my eyes say to him, “I love him more than this whole world and I want him to be a good man. He is gonna be a handful.”

What is Amir thinking when we look at each other like this, I wonder. He never questions these odd moments, as he does everything else. The achingly beautiful moments hurt. I get up or I lie down or I read a book or write or watch TV until Raphael knocks and says “I'm out” and I watch him, with his bouncy gait as he strides outside. I lock the door behind him. And to make up for my desire I go to

Amir and hug him roughly, till he stiffens up with discomfort and narrows his eyes in question. He opens his mouth and I know he means to ask why. Why do I hug him so hard, why I watch him sleep at night, why I go over and over what I expect from him now and as a grown man later? But instead he says, "I love you, Mommy." I say, simply, "I love you too, little Prince." I ruffle his hair and think of his father

Amir pointed to a framed picture of Bob Marley that Raphael had given him.

"Whasth tha' on he head, Mommy?"

"Dreadlockth? You mean, like lockth on the door?"

"No, well kind of, but it's a hairstyle where people let their hair strands lock so it's unable to be combed."

"Daddy have hair like that. Right, Mommy?"

"Yes, son."

"Mooooommy! Can I do my hair like that?"

Amir looks at me with enlightenment, which turns into breathless anticipation. I know what he is gonna say before he says it.

"You sure?"

“Yeah, Mommy. When I go out with Daddy all his friendth have little oneth and big oneth and long oneth and short oneth. And they walk like....”

He did an open legged strut across the room.

I laughed with joy.

“And you wanna look like that, too?”

“Yeah!”

“Ok, later. When you are older.”

“No, Mommy!” he stomps his foot. “I hate when you say that. That’s something I can do now and I want it now!”

“Alright. I’ll ask your Daddy to twist your hair for you,” I say, stroking the strands of his crinkly, out of control mane.

“Can’t you do it yourself?”

“I can do it myself, but I just thought you might want your Daddy to do it.”

“No, Mommy, I want you to do it and I’ll surprise Daddy.”

“Okay, I have to twist your hair and then you just leave it alone and soon it’ll be like Daddy’s.”

I washed his hair and parted it carefully, using gel and his wet, natural hair texture to put medium sized two strand twists in his hair. When I finished, he scrambled up to the mirror.

“Ewwww. I look like a girl,” he exclaimed.

“No, you don’t.”

I pushed his hair to the back of his head and smiled.

Sometimes I looked at him and I felt that my heart was breaking.

It was a warm Sunday evening. My apartment was smoky and the fragrant aroma of fried chicken and cornbread produced saliva in my mouth. The doorbell rung and my two men stood there. I raised an eyebrow towards Raphael, and give him a half-hearted smile and let Amir run past me. When we looked at each other, sometimes, it was impossible to break the gaze. I asked him if he wanted to come in. Eat.

He shook his head.

“Naw, naw. I just making sure he gets up here all right. Y’know.”

“He’s everything like you.”

“I see that,” he said, with a smirk.

He turned around and left. Through the window I watched him, heart-sinking, as he jumped into his car, driven by a woman with long, black weave. Even after all this time, I was jealous. I wanted to call out, “Did he teach you? Take your virginity? Touch you so gently you cried tears of joy? Do you have his child?” I wanted her to hear me.

They never looked back. When I turned around, there Amir was—staring at me.

“Do you love Daddy, Mommy?”

“Very much, baby.”

“Are you mad that he hath another girlfriend?”

“No,” I lied. I wanted Amir to be happy.

“She’th niceth, Mommy.”

“Uh, really...”

“Yesterday, it was warm, and we went to the Bronx Zoo, and it was so much fun.”

“Really?” I faked a smile. “We’ll talk about that later.” My anger bubbled and exuded from me in steams. I send Amir to the bedroom and called Raphael.

“What’s up?”

“Don’t you ever bring your women in front of my child again! You hear me?” I yelled, slapping my thighs to emphasize each word.

“Raphael, I don’t want my child to see your chick. She is not his mother. I am his mother. And if I can’t trust you with him, then he won’t go out with you no more. SHIT!”

“Tahaj, what’s the problem, huh? What’s the problem, now? Don’t play no games. You know that I’m in a relationship now. She is going to be around him. Aren’t you above this?”

“Don’t bring that woman around my child. Ok? Bye,” I slammed the phone down on its hook.

I flopped down on my couch. Amir was sitting, watching me with his mouth open.

“Come here, my prince,” I said, with my arms opened to him.

He trotted toward me.

“Mommy, why you call me Prince?”

I picked him up and put him in my lap. “Cuz Amir in Arabic means prince, I think.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh.”

“And cuz I think you’re my prince,” I said, tickling him on his pudgy stomach.

“That means you’re a Queen, right?”

I chuckled. His father had called me a queen, before. His queen. "I guess so."

The next day, the doorbell rung right after dinner and there he was. Raphael. I opened the door and let him in.

"I came to take Amir to the park."

"You came to talk Amir to the park? But you didn't call or anything. He's with my mother. He spent the night."

He sucked his teeth and turned to leave, then went about face again and paused.

"Why you do that to your hair? ...Such lovely locks." He reached out a hand and then stopped it. He let it drop. I looked away.

"You paid for me to start them, remember? Your spirit was all in my hair. I needed a new beginning."

"Tahaj... You know I'm sorry. I am trying to make up for what I did."

I ignored him. "You want to know the truth? Every time I touched my locks, I thought about you. Now every time I see Amir, I see you. Sometimes I felt like there was no escaping you and what you did to me. I gave everything up for you and your child, because I hoped it would make a happy family, now I'm just like my mother when I wanted to do better."

“I loved you. I know that I truly did care about you. But at the time I didn’t know how I could be a father. I know I was twenty-six, damn near twenty-seven, but I still had a lot of growing to do.” He wiped away a tear from my face. “Now, I love Amir more than life, but at that time I couldn’t picture you with my child. I couldn’t picture an ‘us’. You were so damn young. I was scared. I wanted you to follow your dreams. Don’t cry!”

He put his arms around my neck.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

He rocked me slowly as I cried. Suddenly I feel his rough textured lips against mine. He looked into my eyes as he quickly undressed me. I moved from him like I was young and inexperienced again. It had been years for me. He held onto my hips, entered me. No protection. When was the last time I’ve had this level of such sweetness, completeness? He covered my lips with his and his warm tongue entered my mouth.

For that hour, I tried not to think. There was no future, no consequences, regret, guilt, hurt, unhappiness. There were only body parts, darkness of closed lids and broken time fragments where I lost myself so completely in this man I didn’t know where he ended and I began. I transported myself to a space without time. Are those my fingers, toes curled, or his? Is that my tongue, my teeth? Are those my dreadlocks spilling down my back? Is that my back? My lips, my pleasure, my

screams, my moans or ... his? My tears were cold on my cheek. His kisses are all over my body. Where am I? Who am I? All of these years and I am a child again?

“I have to go,” he said. I opened my eyes. “Tahaj, things are different now. Let’s just keep this between us, okay?” I didn’t say anything as he got up and dressed, and opened the front door and left.

So what happens now? I wondered, as the front door closed almost soundlessly. I curled up and cried. What happens now? What do you do when you sleep with your baby’s father and he is in love with another woman? What happens when you cry yourself to sleep with images of a happy family that will never be? What happens now?

Four: Crossroads

“I don’t know what to do. I told myself that I would stop, but it happened again.”

Monae puffed angrily. “Tahaj. You need to stop this. That man is using you. He has another woman. He is in another relationship! What the two of you had is over. In fact, the two of you had very little. What can a 16 year-old girl do for a man in his late 20’s?”

“Monae, I’m not looking to get back with him. I just want something for me. He called me one night when Amir was sleeping and I was watching TV. I couldn’t say no. Sometimes I need someone seeing to my needs. Is that so wrong?”

“Tahaj, I don’t know about this. Is the sex that good? Have you been using a condom, at the very least?”

“For all these years, my life has been about Amir, and trying to get myself on track so that I can properly provide for him. Maybe I don’t need anything else but someone to make *me* feel good. Yes, Monae it’s good. And of course we use condoms,” I said with my fingers crossed.

“Is the sex worth more than your self-respect? If it has to be someone, anyone- why him? Why sleep with the man who left you high and dry when you were pregnant with the child that he loves so much today?”

“Monae...”

“This will never be the answer, Tahaj. This will never make you feel good. You might not want to admit it now, but sooner or later you will wonder why you and Raphael and Amir can’t be a family. And you gonna press Raphael to make that decision. And at the end of the day, Raphael is gonna go right back to his chick. Why? ‘Cuz that is what men do. You have to love yourself more than you can ever love that man.”

“Life has just been so hard for me. You know what happened with every guy I’ve tried to date. Raphael, Mike. It always ends up being a sad story. You know.”

“So what! If it doesn’t work with one, you should move on to the next. I think you should leave Amir with your mother and come and chill with me here in Philly for a while. For a week, for a weekend. I think you need a change of scene.”

“A change of scene? Maybe I do. But I have a million things to take care of here in New York. How did I get myself in this situation, Monae? I wanted to go to college and explore the world and have fun. Instead I am here taking care of a baby with a man who doesn’t love me. Who is with another woman. I did so good in high-school, it doesn’t make any sense what I am going through right now.”

“Look, it’s not that far on Greyhound. It’s maybe two and half hours. You need to make some changes in your life. You cannot sit at home, taking care of Amir all the time, and sleeping with that man. He left you when you were pregnant. Did you forget that? You were only 16. You had no one to turn to but me and maybe Chante, but what could we do? We were all kids. He wasn’t even man enough to

deal with the situation he had made. When you don't use condoms, you pass on an STD, or you get a woman pregnant. You are lucky that he was clean."

"I know. I think about it all the time, but I guess I really truly did love him. He was the first man that I've been with. The first man who made me feel truly beautiful. I do need to leave this man in the past."

"You need to believe in your own beauty, so that you don't ever need a man to tell you."

"Maybe I can come for a few days. It might be fun. And it will be good to see you again."

"Just let me know when you want to come. It's nothing but a word... and a Greyhound ticket."

We both laughed and then ended the conversation.

A week later, I called Monae, crying my eyes out. "Monae. I want to come. I need to get away."

"What happened?"

"I was at the Kings Plaza with my friend, Jackie. And I saw Raphael."

"Ok?"

"He was with his woman. And..."

"What happened, Tahaj?"

“He turned his head. He just pretended like he hadn’t seen me, and kept walking with her. And... oh, god. She’s beautiful, Monae. She has this long, thick hair, and she is tall and dark skinned. She looks Indo-Caribbean. It shouldn’t matter, but it does. I had to go to the bathroom to cry. I didn’t even feel like telling Jackie the exact situation. She was freaking out a little bit.”

“What did you expect him to do, run up and give you a hug? Didn’t I tell you that this wasn’t good for you? Can you be ready to come tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’ll take Amir to my mother’s house tonight, and pack. I can take an evening bus. I just want to get the fuck out of here.”

“Okay, just remember to bring proper ID to get the bus ticket.”

I can’t believe that I’m on a Greyhound bus to Philadelphia. This will be a break from everything. But when I get back, I am still going to have to face my life. This is my life. This is what I have made of my life. I love Amir. I truly do. I just wish I had him at 30 instead of at 18. I’m 24. What can I teach him, when I feel like I am still learning so much myself? I don’t like this woman that I am right now. Right before I met Raphael I had so much potential. Now, I am all the way back up at a size 20. I didn’t go to college, I’m not working. I am surviving on food stamps, welfare and child support. No. This is not me. This can never be me. I need to get myself back. I want to get a degree and get a job. But I just need help. I need so much help right now.

The two hour ride was over before I could think too hard or too long.

“Tahaj!” Monae ran and hugged me. “Oh my god, girl. Look at you.” I smiled at Monae, who is even more voluptuous now, but still small framed and beautifully dark brown.

“Yeah, look at me. I gained so much weight.”

“Shut up. You look beautiful. I done put on a couple pounds too,” she said outlining her hips with her palms.

“Oh please, what- your hips and your booty got even bigger? That’s good for you. Wow, girl. You look great.”

“Thanks girl. For the weekend you’re free. Amir is with Raphael. This weekend is all about you and me. The first thing we need to do is our nails, toes, and eyebrows. We’re going to be soo hot. You still got the red fade going, huh?”

“Yea, for right now. This is my look. Sometimes I think of growing it out and putting braids in, but I just don’t know. I’m really confused.”

“Honestly, you look beautiful right now. And this is probably easier and cheaper to maintain than doing braids every couple of months.”

“Yea, the less stress, the better. Especially with my hair, I have so many other things to think about.”

“Well, whatever is on your mind, just forget about it for this weekend. Ok? It’s so good to see you again!”

On Saturday morning, Monae told me to write a list of what I wanted.

“Sometimes lists help.” she urged. We were sitting, Indian style, on her bed. She jumped up and got me a writing pad and a pen. Erykah Badu’s *Mama Gun* was emanating softly from Monae’s Mac laptop.

“Write ten things that you want to accomplish in your life by this time next year.”

“Number one. I want a good man in my life.”

“Tahaj, you should move that to number ten. This is about you.”

I laughed. “Ok. Do over. Number one: get off of welfare. Number two: do a training program and get a good, decent paying job. Number three: only deal with Raphael concerning Amir. Number four: get an Associate’s degree. Number five: Lose at least 50 pounds.

“Honestly Tahaj, I have an idea that I have been thinking about for a little while. What do you think about coming down and staying with me for a little while? I don’t have a lot, but maybe you can do a training program and get a job. You can be a nurse. Once upon a time you did want to be a doctor, this can be a chance for you to move on with your life, meet new people and get away from Raphael for just a bit. You need a change of scene.”

“I don’t know Monae. I love Brooklyn and my family is there. I know my mother can be horrible at times but she has helped with Amir. I wouldn’t want to be a burden on you because it wouldn’t only be me, I have my son too.”

When I went home, I found myself walking the streets of Brooklyn. “There is no other place that can feel so much like home. Everyone only thinks of Manhattan when they think of New York City. New York City is so much more than Manhattan? That cold place with sky-scraping buildings and masses of people, overwhelmingly white, pushing each other as they rush to their corporate jobs? Brooklyn, right along with Queens, and the Bronx, don’t exist to people who don’t know the city. I know the brownstones, the dealers, the West Indian Day Parade. I remember when I first felt the hardness of a dark-skinned sweating man as he pressed up against my body. I was a big-boned- twelve going on seventeen. I enjoyed the bones of his pelvis and wined my softness on him a little until my mother shooed him away, horrified and indignant but also laughing.

I know the corner *bodega* on Utica and Eastern Parkway where the Puerto Rican owner has sold me a Hershey’s Cookie and Cream chocolate bar damn near every afternoon of elementary school for 5 years, and he still recognized me at 16. I can still taste those 360 calories of orgasmic white chocolate heaven that I felt that I couldn’t live without, that I salivated and dream over every day while I stared into space in Biology. Outsiders don’t know the Black faces, the brown faces, the *wha gwan*, the *sak pase*, the *yo shorty*. They don’t know the Haitians, the Jamaicans, Trinidadians, Puerto Ricans, the Dominicans. The experience of leaving small hot islands for cold cities and making it their own, coming with their Creole French, their Spanish, their loud passionate Jamaican patois. English. Outsiders don’t know Brooklyn, the way I know Brooklyn, and the way my parents know

Brooklyn. Do they know, Utica, Nostrand, Pitken, Flatbush Avenues, and how the rhythms of these streets are in my blood?

On a park bench with Amir on my mind, I whispered “I’m leaving now Brooklyn, but you will see me again.”

That night, I called Raphael, so he could bring Amir. He was there in an hour. When I opened the door, he went to put Amir in his room. I was still dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt, standing against the door frame of the living room with my arms folded, trying to put together the words I needed. He embraced me and started kissing me, touching my skin under my tee-shirt, but I pushed him away.

“What’s up with you? Why are you acting like this?”

“Raphael, we need to talk. I can-not do this anymore. What kind of example is this for Amir? He sees us together, and he sees you with your girlfriend. What is he possibly thinking? That’s it ok to have your cake and eat it too?”

“How am I having my cake and eating it too? You wanted this just like I did. So what’s the problem now? You never complained about this before.”

“I know that you’re Amir’s father and I love that we made Amir. I don’t know who I would be without him.” I paused, and looked at Raphael. He nodded.

“Sometimes at night, I think about the fact that you left me when I needed you most, and you know what? I don’t love you anymore. I deserve so much more than this shit. I am 23 years old and I don’t have time to play anymore. We are not together. So that means that you will never touch, see, smell, feel, or taste this pussy ever again.”

He looked at me with an eyebrow raised and we both started laughing. I sat down on the couch and he sat down next to me. I folded my legs and sat facing him Indian style.

“Raphael, I can’t do this anymore. I feel like I am at the crossroads of my life now. I want my own life and my own man. If you care about me at all, as Amir’s mother, you will be cool with me doing what I need to do for me. I need to make some changes.”

“Tahaj, I have changed and grown a lot over the years. I am not perfect, you know that. If you want to change, all you need is to will to change. I’m not standing in your way.”

I took a deep breath, and rolled my eyes. “I am not in love with you. I don’t want you and I don’t need you. All I need from you is to be a good father to our son. He needs a man in his life.”

“Can I have some water?”

I got up and moved to the kitchen. “So how was your trip to Philly?” Raphael called, “Who you been talking to, to make you want all these changes?”

“Raphael, you don’t need to worry about that. Just know that I want to move there. Soon.” I came back and handed him the glass. He raised an eyebrow.

“And I want you to take care of Amir for the school year, while I get myself together. I’m going to stay with one of my girlfriends.”

“You wait until now in the conversation to tell me this? I don’t know, Tahaj. I would need to check in with wifey. She’s cool with him coming to visit, but a whole year?”

“Does your girlfriend live with you now?”

“Yep, she moved in with me last month. Amir needs you. Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes, Raphael. I want this. I’m giving myself about a month to tie up some loose ends.”

“I guess having Amir with us is cool. Alright? Just let me know when you are ready to bring him.” Raphael put the glass on the coffee table.

Raphael and I got up. I wrapped my arms around myself. I didn’t know what to do, what to say. He had responded to everything with more love than I thought he would. Raphael moved forward, gave me a kiss on the cheek and we hugged.

“No matter what happens, I want what is best for you and Amir. I know that I fucked up when you got pregnant, but I am a better man now.”

Five: Awakening

The first thing Monae did when I got to her apartment and settled down, was hand me a copy of Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*. I looked at the lime green cover and raised an eyebrow at the image of a woman with curled hair. I opened the book and started to skim through.

"It's by Audre Lorde, I had to read it my first semester at Temple. You need to read this. You can keep it. I have like 2 other copies. You need to read about what it is to be a Black woman, especially one in America. Read *Uses of the Erotic* first. She talks about redefining the erotic. It helped me understand what my life needed to be about."

"Why do you think I need to read this? I haven't even thought of reading any book in so long."

"I was just looking through my books from college and I saw this and it hit me that you need this. You're starting a new chapter of your life, so you need a new guidebook."

"So what does that mean: Uses of the Erotic?"

"Read it. I have to go to work, and we are gonna just chill and talk tonight. Maybe order some food, but tomorrow night we are going out to a poetry reading with some friends of mine. You might as well get started getting to know Philly. Read that essay while you wait for me and we can talk about it when I get back."

“So now, your giving me homework assignments?”

“Shut up, Tahaj.”

When the door closed, I set the book down and wandered throughout her apartment. I rifled through her things, trying to understand the person she had become since high-school. I looked through her clothes, I looked at her food. I found her journal in the nightstand next to her bed. I wanted to read it, but I felt like that would be too much of a violation. I didn't get around to the book she had given me until an hour later. I sighed and opened the book to the essay she had pointed out. After I read the first page, I couldn't sit still, I started to pace the room. Every word that Audre Lorde wrote was like a fire igniting me. I felt like nothing I had read prior mattered to my life the way this work mattered. I had moved to Philadelphia from Brooklyn to find the erotic, find the source of my strength, and find the joy in my life. I had allowed myself to be oppressed by my own choices, by my disconnection from the erotic. When I finished the essay, I sat down. What was my joy, what was my erotic? What was my work?

Monae came back that night with some Jamaican food. She reheated the food and fixed two plates. “I got us some rice and peas and chicken. I went to Blockbusters and got us a few movies, in case you were interested.”

“So, miss thing, what did you think of the essay? You did read it, right?”

“Of course I read it, and I felt like it changed my life. I've never read anything that I connect with so much. I felt like leaving Brooklyn was the right thing to do

for right now. Women go through so much oppression and repression. I need to be free. I've been through so much from Raphael to Mike to everything and I'm ready to just find everything that brings me joy outside of these relationships.”

I woke up, knowing that everything was going to be alright. I was alive and well. I was 24. I was a mother. I was a woman, a Black woman, who would soon know what it took to carry herself with love, and who wanted to conquer the world using the erotic source within me.

And now, I was ready.

My Reflection on the Development of *Crossroads: A Novella*

I am a Black woman from Brooklyn, New York, stemming from a line of people who come from small islands in the Caribbean, namely Dominica and St. Vincent. As a Black woman, my life has been shaped by adversity, poverty, and struggle. Although the roadblocks were numerous, I found the strength to continue and succeed. During my years at Syracuse University, I have worked hard and consistently aimed for the highest achievements possible. I am the first to go to college in my nuclear family. Nothing was given to me and I have taken nothing for granted. Throughout my adolescence, I spent many years without a home of my own, living with family members and friends in cramped apartments, often away from my own nuclear family. I read to compensate for the tumultuousness of my life. I drowned myself in writers: Morrison, Walker, Baldwin, Danticat, and Wright. I was accepted to Syracuse University through the Higher Education Opportunity Program (HEOP). In my time at Syracuse, I have achieved some of the highest academic honors that the University bestows on students. I am a member of the Renee Crown University Honors Program, a Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Scholar, and a Remembrance Scholar. These accomplishments represent that I am a student of the highest caliber and will continue to achieve in post-baccalaureate education.

My academic majors at Syracuse University are African-American Studies. In the summer after my junior year, I spent five and a half weeks in Paris, France, as a participant in the Paris Noir program, studying the African Diaspora of Paris. I did not speak any French, but over time adapted to the language, as

well as the cultural and time differences. Even though I lived in the 13th arrondissement, I realized that I loved the African markets of the 18th arrondissement, known as the “Little Africa” in Paris. In Paris, I decided to do my research project on African market women. My research was titled “The Lived Experiences of African Market Women.” With the help of a male friend that I had recently met on the crowded streets of Chateau D’Eau, I interviewed two Cameroonian women about their experiences transitioning from the markets of Cameroon to selling in the streets of Paris. I was amazed at how these women were “diasporic” links for the Africans who had moved from places like Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Cameroon to Paris.

As a senior, I was awarded by the English department with the opportunity to do research and complete a thesis, which would earn me ETS Distinction. My second research experience was on the role of women performers, called DJs, in Jamaican Dancehall music. I combined this opportunity with the McNair Post-Baccalaureate Program to write a thirty page thesis and to give a twenty minute presentation during the McNair colloquium in April 2010. The research was entitled “Dancehall Queens: Female Jamaican Deejays are the ‘Small Axe’ Working to Chop Down the ‘Big Tree’ of Patriarchy.” My third research experience was in an English graduate preparatory program at the University of Delaware. During the four weeks, I worked on and presented a paper titled “Un/Mothering Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*: The Embodiment of the Sexually Radical Blues Woman Figure by Marie, China, and Poland.” My undergraduate research has focused on Queens.

From the Market Queen, to the Dancehall Queen, to the Queen of the Blues, my primary research focus is the experiences of Black women in the African Diaspora and the literature that document these experiences. My prior research centers on this unending, insatiable interest. My academic goal is to go on and receive a joint Ph.D. in English Literature and Africana studies. My career goal is to become a scholar and professor in Africana Studies.

Despite all of this academic success, as a fifth year senior, I wanted to tap into the creative side of my life. For my Honors Capstone, I decided to transform my short story, *Raphael*, into a novella, now titled *Crossroads*. It is May 2011. Now facing the completion of my novella, *Crossroads*, I feel like a proud mother who has watched her child grow from a baby into a teenager. I know that the work of my novella, *Crossroads*, is not over. Now the hard part begins, where I develop *Crossroads* into full maturity. I personally have grown with each re-write of this work. I wrote *Raphael* at 16 years old, while a sophomore at Middle College High-School at Medgar Evers College. Now, my novella, *Crossroads*, has undergone a name change and has grown substantially in length.

The Beginning

My first draft of *Raphael* was about 12 pages. I wrote it when I lived in East New York, a particularly rough area of Brooklyn, New York. I met a man who was many years my senior. I knew that he would be a part of my life. I also knew that it would end badly. I wrote *Raphael* when I was in the dreaming stage, before I knew anything significant about the man who would be a part of my life.

The main character was named Patricia, an amateurish device that proved the protagonist's connection to me and my story. It was told from the view of a young mother whose world revolved around her son, Amir. For multiple rewrites of *Raphael*, it began with these words.

My Amir is a small boy with eyes big as moons. Although he has existed for six years, I am still enamored with him, still find everything he does enchanting. He walks with a manly six year old swagger, talks with a low lisp and analyzes everything perfectly, in terms that are black or white—never in between. When I was growing up with him (cause when I had him at eighteen, I wasn't fully grown myself), I was enthralled with how much he seemed to be a smaller version of his father. People say it all the time about their children, but it was not until I saw the flesh of my flesh put into my arms that I realized how completely, utterly, devastating and miraculous the fact of it is.

Although I love this section of the story, and this paragraph in particular, I knew that I had to develop my work. I realized very early on that I had to change the name. "Patricia" became Tahaj, because I wanted a unique name for my character. My middle name is Anne-Marie, so I hyphenated Marie onto Tahaj's name, creating Tahaj-Marie. In order for me to develop the story, I wanted develop Tahaj Marie as a woman beyond her role as Amir's mother. I wanted to show her coming of age as a woman, with fears, hurts, pains and desires. By the end of my work, my opening paragraph read like this.

I knew my mother so well that I could tell her mood just by how hard the door slammed. That night, she slammed the door with the fierceness of a woman who had not known an easy day in years. I woke up from my nap and listened. She flung her keys onto the table and stomped angrily into the kitchen. Today, I felt it in my bones. Today was going to be that day. The day when we fought it out like only a hardworking West Indian mother and a lazy piece of shit rebellious daughter could.

Title

For years the name of this work was *Raphael*. Of course, I knew at some point that the work was going to need a name change, because, in fact, it was not based around Raphael at all. I needed a name based on my character's process, journey, and growth. Although Raphael is a large portion of her life and identity, what I wanted for Tahaj was to realize the beauty of her life outside of her relationship with Raphael and outside of her relationship with Amir. The title *Crossroads* allowed me to explore the significance of the crossroads that everyone faces at one point or another in their lives.

Characterization

In order for me to develop *Raphael* into *Crossroads*, I had to delve into characterization and who and what I wanted each character to be. I sat down and worked out character sketches for each character, and their role in the novella. In

Crossroads, the main characters are Tahaj-Marie, Raphael, Amir, Ebony, Joan and Monae.

Physically, my protagonist, Tahaj-Marie, is on the taller side. She is approximately 5'8, and cinnamon-colored. She has a moderately curvaceous, womanly figure and a beautiful smile. In the early portions of the book, she is still uncomfortable in her body, which she feels is disastrously overweight. She does manage to lose some weight in the summer before her senior year, which inspires a burst of confidence. She is extremely intelligent and hopes to leave her tense relationship with her mother by going away to college, and pursuing her dreams of being a professor. For Tahaj-Marie, these dreams are put on hold when she meets Raphael and becomes pregnant with his child. He deserts her and in an effort to hold on to the relationship, she considers having an abortion. In the end, she makes the decision to carry the child to term. Although this ruins her relationship with her strict mother, she cherishes her son, Amir. Tahaj does get into Cornell, and she chooses to defer her admission for a year. When she does go to the Pre-Freshman Summer Program for HEOP admits, she meets a boy named Mike, who chooses to distance himself from her when he finds out that she has a baby. She decides to return to Brooklyn and raise her son on her own. She meets Raphael again, and discovers that he wants to make an attempt to be a part of his son's life. With the addition of Raphael in her life again, Tahaj faces a re-emergence of desire for Raphael, which the two act upon, despite Raphael's new relationship. When Tahaj sees Raphael in the mall with his girlfriend, and he avoids her, she knows that she has to make some changes in her life. Her friend,

Monae, allows her to visit Philadelphia, and she decides to move there.

Throughout the novella, after the birth of her son, Tahaj-Marie's life is filled with various struggles. She struggles with her weight, being a single mother, her relationship with her own mother, and Raphael. By the end of the novella, she is ready to make many changes in her life towards her holistic health and wellness. In *Crossroads*, we follow Tahaj on her road to happiness.

Chante is one of Tahaj's friends in the early part of the novella. She is the "it girl" that Tahaj is envious of. She is 5'6, caramel-colored, with long colored hair and a curvy body. In high-school she is the popular girl, who still manages to be friends with Tahaj-Marie because they have known each other from a very young age. They have a close bond. As the novella progresses we see less and less of her, because she ends up dating a boy that Tahaj-Marie had a crush on. Their friendship ends there.

Monae is a high-school friend of Tahaj-Marie. She is integral part of the novella and aids in Tahaj-Marie's development. In the earlier parts of the book, she struggles with the way her beautiful dark skin is perceived. Overall, though, she is self-confident in her beauty and her petite, curvaceous body. Monae is an amazing friend. It is Monae who Tahaj-Marie turns to when she first considers having an abortion. Monae is very intelligent. After high-school, she ends up going to Temple University and working. At the end of the novella, she reaches out to Tahaj and asks her to consider moving to Philadelphia in order to give her life a fresh start. It is Monae who gives Tahaj a copy of *Sister Outsider* and helps her to realize the potential of the erotic in life.

Raphael is the father of Amir. He is from Jamaica. His stature is about 6'0 feet tall, and on the heavier side. When they meet, he is twenty-six years old. He doesn't quite have a job at the beginning. Raphael lives in his mother's apartment. She doesn't spend much time there because she works with a family where she lives for the week. Raphael struggles with the fact that he is a product of a very young mother and a deadbeat father and feels that he doesn't want to have children. His struggles lead him to desert Tahaj in her time of need. Raphael does mature and does come through as a father figure for Amir by the end. He also does not stand in Tahaj's way when she decides to move to Philadelphia and asks him to take care of Amir for a year.

Plot

It was difficult creating scenes and a plot for *Crossroads* from the simplistic storyline of Raphael. At first, I divided the novella into two parts. The first part was about her time in high-school before she has Amir. The second part was about her life six years later, as she deals with being a single mother and continuing a sexual relationship with the father of her child. The simple *Part One* and *Part Two* developed into five sections. The five sections are *Raphael*, *Amir*, *Tested*, *Crossroads*, and *Awakening*.

Part One: Raphael

Part One serves as an introduction to Tahaj-Marie and her life. She is a motivated, intelligent young woman who lives in Flatbush, Brooklyn and wants to go away to college. She is sixteen and finishing her junior year in high-school. In

Part One, the story starts in December, during Christmas break. Tahaj is in an awkward stage of life. She is a little bit shy and overweight. She spends some time with friends, but always feels like the ugly duckling. She lives with her mother, who is from Guadeloupe. Tahaj and her mother, Joan, experience much turmoil. Her mother is broken-hearted and bitter because her relationship with Tahaj's abusive father did not work out. Her father is not a part of the novella. Tahaj feels much pressure as an only child, and sometimes rebels against her mother's strictness.

In December of 2003, Tahaj gets into an argument with her mother for not cleaning the house the way she is supposed to. In the wee hours of Wednesday, Tahaj-Marie goes to Chante's house. Chante convinces her to go to a New Year's Party that night. They go out, buy a dress, rest a bit, and then get ready to go to the party. Tahaj meets Raphael at the New Year's Party

In March of 2004, Tahaj's aunt, Ebony comes to visit for her birthday. She turns 17 that day. Ebony's visit helps Tahaj to understand the struggles that her mother has faced in life. Although she will never be able to connect with her mother, her relationship with her aunt is one that is truly fulfilling.

In August, Tahaj meets Raphael again on Nostrand Avenue. She feels shy and awkward, so she makes her get-away. In September, Tahaj-Marie's senior year in high-school begins. At the end of the month, there is a beginning of the year school party. Tahaj dances with Ron, the new guy who has everyone under his spell, and she thinks that he is interested in her. During the party, Monae

storms out. Tahaj runs to comfort her. She learns that she has been insulted by her boyfriend's friends because of her skin color. The next week, Ron asks Chante out, and the friendship between Tahaj and Chante begins to end as Chante begins a relationship with Ron. Tahaj feels that Ron used her to have an entry way to Chante. After school, Tahaj is depressed and embarrassed because of the situation with Ron. She meets Raphael again on the street and decides to spend time with him at his house. They begin to develop a personal relationship.

In October, Tahaj begins to see Raphael regularly. Tahaj meets with school counselor, Ms. Ross, who encourages her to apply to excellent schools, like Cornell. Tahaj realizes that her dreams could become a reality. In November, Raphael convinces her to begin dreadlocks and Tahaj finishes applying to college. In December, Tahaj loses her virginity to Raphael. She goes to a salon with Raphael, who pays to have her hair twisted into locs. She has an argument with her mother about the relationship.

In January 2005, Tahaj finds out that she is pregnant. She tells Raphael and falls into despair when he responds unfavorably. In February, Tahaj almost has an abortion with her friend Monae by her side, but changes her mind and begins pre-natal care.

Part Two: Amir

In March, Tahaj walks out of the bathroom, to meet face to face with her mother, who suspects that Tahaj is pregnant. Tahaj later finds out that she got into Cornell, but decides to ask for a year off. She turns 18 this month. In June, Tahaj

graduates. Her mother is frustrated with her and embarrassed that her daughter is pregnant during her graduate ceremony.

On Sunday, October 16th, 2005 Amir is born. In March of 2006, Tahaj cuts her dreadlocks completely off. This change is based on her desire to free herself from the hold that her relationship with Raphael has on her. During the period from March 25th, 2006 to August 2006, Tahaj focuses on taking care of Amir. Amir turns one and Tahaj turns 19 during that time. In Part Two, Tahaj develops as a woman when her son, Amir is born. Her love for him runs extremely deep and she realizes her life is changed forever.

Part Three: Tested

In June 2006, Tahaj leaves to go to Cornell for a summer program. She begins a relationship with an intelligent boy named Mike, but in the end he decides that he is not comfortable with her having a son and distances himself from her. He begins another relationship. Tahaj becomes depressed and she decides that she cannot continue at Cornell.

Part Four: Crossroads

After the crisis at Cornell, Tahaj applies for housing and welfare. She is accepted for housing and moves in. She is 21 at this time. Amir is 3. Tahaj meets Raphael in the subway station and asks him to begin seeing Amir, because he needs him. That month, Raphael begins seeing his son. Tahaj and Raphael begin another sexual relationship, in addition to his recognized relationship with an Indo-Caribbean woman named Angela. Tahaj-Marie is aware of Raphael's new

relationship, but she continues sleeping with Raphael irregularly despite this. Amir wants dreadlocks. When Tahaj sees Angela and Raphael at the mall with a friend, she is upset because Raphael avoids speaking to her in front of his girlfriend. She knows that she has to change her life.

In August 2011, she goes to visit Monae. It is her friend, Monae, who pushes her out of depression. When Tahaj visits, she asks Tahaj to move to Philadelphia with her and begin anew. Tahaj is at the crossroads of her life. She thinks hard about what decisions she must make. When she returns from Philadelphia, she realizes that she wants to move there. She asks Raphael to take care of Amir while she gets herself together.

Part Five: Awakening

In September 2011, Tahaj decides that she needs to leave New York and the poisonous relationship. She takes Amir to stay with Raphael. She moves to Philadelphia to live with Monae. When she gets to Philadelphia, Monae hands Tahaj a copy of *Sister Outsider* and advises her to read *Uses of the Erotic*. The essay changes her perspective on life.

Finally, Tahaj-Marie wakes up on January 1st and feels empowered to continue to change her life. It's a new year and a new day. The end of the novella is where my future novel will open up into exploring the shape and form that Tahaj's life will take.

“My End Game” (According to Arthur Flowers)

I ended *Crossroads* on this note:

I woke up, knowing that everything was going to be alright. I was alive and well. I was 24. I was a mother. I was a woman, a Black woman, who would soon know what it took to carry herself with love, and who wanted to conquer the world using the erotic source within me.

And now, I was ready

Message

While I worked on *Crossroads*, I wanted to write work that I would have enjoyed reading throughout my own teenage years. I wanted to write about some of the experiences that girls in the inner-city go through. My character, Tahaj-Marie has made difficult decisions in her life, but most importantly, she doesn't let these things keep her down forever. As a woman of color who has been through tremendous obstacles, I want my work to inspire girls who feel that they have nowhere to turn, and who feel that life has given them hard knocks. No matter the odds, you can overcome them, with help, as well as with a strong belief in oneself.

Conclusion

As a graduating senior from the Arts and Sciences school of Syracuse University, *Crossroads* is a major goal realized. As a doe-eyed freshman, I knew that I wanted to make writing a big part of my life, but as the years passed I became more and more engrossed in the academic side of my life. Choosing to

write this novella as my Honors Capstone allowed me to explore the creative side of my being. This experience greatly shaped and influenced my senior year, and helped me to realize all of the potential that I have. I could not have completed a year of this work without the love, support and much scolding from Arthur Flowers, my advisor. Like Tahaj, I am at a crossroads, and I am excited to see what the next few years will bring.

Crossroads: Summary

Crossroads is the journey of a young, Black girl into a powerful Black woman. Part One: Raphael, serves as an introduction to Tahaj-Marie and her life. She is a motivated, intelligent, young woman who lives in Flatbush, Brooklyn. She wants to go away to college. In the beginning of *Crossroads*, she is sixteen and finishing her junior year in high-school. In Part One, the story starts in December, during Christmas break. Tahaj-Marie is the only child of her single mother, Joan, who is from Guadeloupe. Tahaj and her mother, Joan, experience much turmoil. Her mother is broken-hearted and bitter because her relationship with Tahaj's abusive father did not work out. Her father is not a part of the novella. Tahaj feels much pressure as an only child, and desires to rebel against her mother's strictness.

Crossroads opens with Tahaj's decision. She has decided that she will not be the good daughter anymore and obey her mother's every whim. When her mother comes home from a double shift only to find the apartment not cleaned to her demands, Tahaj and her mother face off in an epic battle between mother and daughter. Her mother is thinned and stressed out from overwork. After being slapped by her angry mother, Tahaj leaves to spend some time with one of her best friends, Chante, until her mother calms down. It happens to be New Year's Eve and Chante is excited about her new, sparkly black sequined dress, and plans to go to a New Year's Eve party to celebrate the oncoming year, which is 2004. Although Tahaj-Marie isn't in the mood to go, she goes to Flatbush Avenue to get a new dress, and allows herself to be made over with a wig and a pair of Chante's

sister's heels. At the party, Tahaj-Marie feels a little out of place and insecure. Someone insults her while going in, but another man, tells her that she is beautiful. Of course, this turns out to be Raphael, who makes his attraction known to her inside the club, where he asks her to dance.

In March of 2004, Tahaj's aunt, Ebony, comes to visit for her birthday. She turns 17 that day. Ebony's visit helps Tahaj to understand the struggles that her mother has faced in life. Although she will never be able to connect with her mother, her relationship with her aunt is one that is truly fulfilling.

In August, Tahaj meets Raphael again on Nostrand Avenue. She feels shy and awkward, so she makes her get-away. In September, Tahaj-Marie's senior year in high-school begins. At the end of the month, there is a beginning of the year school party. Tahaj dances with Ron, the new guy who has everyone under his spell, and she thinks that he is interested in her. During the party, Monae storms out. Tahaj runs to comfort her. Tahaj learns that she has been insulted by her boyfriend's friends because of her skin color. The next week, Ron asks Chante out, and the friendship between Tahaj and Chante begins to end as Chante begins a relationship with Ron. Tahaj feels that Ron used her to have an entry way to Chante. After school, Tahaj is depressed and embarrassed because of the situation with Ron. She meets Raphael again on the street and decides to spend time with him at his house. They begin to develop a personal relationship.

In October, Tahaj begins to see Raphael regularly. Tahaj meets with school counselor, Ms. Ross, who encourages her to apply to excellent schools like

Cornell. Tahaj realizes that her dreams could become a reality. In November, Raphael convinces her to begin dreadlocks. Tahaj finishes applying to college. In December, Tahaj loses her virginity to Raphael. She goes to a salon with Raphael, who pays to have her hair twisted into locs. She has an argument with her mother about her relationship with Raphael.

In January 2005, Tahaj finds out that she is pregnant. She tells Raphael and falls into despair when he responds unfavorably. In February, Tahaj almost has an abortion with her friend Monae by her side, but changes her mind and begins pre-natal care.

Part Two- Amir

In March, Tahaj walks out of the bathroom, to meet face to face with her mother, who suspects that Tahaj is pregnant. Tahaj finds out that she got into Cornell, but decides to ask for a year off. She turns 18 this month. In June, Tahaj graduates. Her mother is frustrated with her and embarrassed that her daughter is pregnant during her graduate ceremony.

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Part Three- Tested

In June 2006 of Tahaj leaves to go to Cornell for a summer program. She begins a relationship with an intelligent boy named Mike, but in the end he decides that he is not comfortable with her having a son and distances himself from her. He begins another relationship. Becomes depressed, she decides that she cannot continue at Cornell.

Part Four- Crossroads

After the crisis at Cornell, Tahaj applies for housing and welfare. She is accepted for housing and moves in. She is 21 at this time. Amir is 3. Tahaj meets Raphael in the subway station and asks him to begin seeing Raphael, because he needs him. That month, Raphael begins seeing his son. Tahaj and Raphael begin another sexual relationship, in addition to his recognized relationship with an Indo-Caribbean woman named Angela. She is aware of Raphael's new relationship but she continues sleeping with Raphael irregularly despite this. Amir wants dreadlocks. When Tahaj sees Angela and Raphael at the mall with a friend, she is upset because Raphael avoids speaking to her in front of his girlfriend. She knows that she has to change her life.

In August 2011, she goes to visit Monae. It is her friend, Monae, who pushes her out of depression. When Tahaj visits, she asks Tahaj to move to Philadelphia with her and begin anew. Tahaj is at the crossroads of her life. She thinks hard about what decisions she must make. When she returns from

Philadelphia, she realizes that she wants to move there. She asks Raphael to take care of Amir, while she gets herself together.

Part Five- Awakening

In September 2011 Tahaj decides that she needs to leave New York and the poisonous relationship. She takes Amir to stay with Raphael. She moves to Philadelphia to live with Monae.

Finally, she wakes up on January 1st and feels empowered to continue to change her life. She accepts that she is 24 years old and a mother to her son, Amir. It's a new year and a new day. The end of the novella is where my future novel will open up into exploring the shape and form that Tahaj-Marie's life will take.

