

*Always Want More*



# *Always Want More*

Banke Awopetu McCullough



Concrete  
Rose  
Publications

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# 1

*"I gotta make a way. I gotta do this now.  
If they don't know your dreams, then  
they can't shoot 'em down."*

J. Cole

"Two Deep for the Intro"

TRACY'S FIRST DREAMS HAD been set in Harlem. When she was a child, February was the most enchanting month of the year. There was African drumming and dance and potlucks with steaming bowls of greens and gospel concerts where mass choirs in sharp robes sang so sweet that you could just about see Jesus. The best of it was when black and white picture books were taken out and the great writers were discussed. Langston Hughes smiled up at her in a tuxedo, his eyes twinkled with the dreams that he so eloquently wrote about. These dreams gripped Tracy's heart and would not let go. Tears welled in her eyes as she recited his work at her first poetry reading. "Hold fast to dreams/for if dreams die/life is a broken-winged bird/that cannot fly." As she grew older she moved on

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

to James Baldwin and Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker and Countee Cullen. The truth they spoke of stirred her in the deepest of places. When she closed her eyes, Harlem loomed.

So on her first night as a Harlem resident, she allowed herself the luxury of rambling around the streets taking in the Apollo Theater and the old Cotton Club and the Lincoln Theatre. She was on her grind her first day there; she dropped in on unwelcoming receptionists, left her portfolio, and then sent thank you cards, and then she called to verify that they had read her work. After three weeks she crossed off the thirty-seventh name on her list and fought back tears. No one had even bitten. Harlem was not cheap and dreams did not pay bills.

After seven weeks and half a dozen rushed through phone calls with her parents, she no longer could stop the tears. She was reduced to lying on the floor in that room, stretching and pulling her body in an attempt to center herself. After another week, she ended up curled up in a ball calling out to Jesus. This had to work.

Two days later she landed an interview with *The Real*. She shook the feature editor's hand and managed to suppress her cries until she made it to the street. She jumped up and down. "Thank You God!"

In college, she had read *The Real* religiously. It was in its pages that she learned of the shocking lengths Republicans had gone to block Black voters, the effects of the Supreme Court's repeal of affirmative action. Her hands shook when she read the feature on Michelle Alexander, who simply and poetically explained how mass incarceration was *The New Jim Crow*. Sandwiched between liquor and fashion ads and features of hip-hops talented elite, *The Real* exposed the hidden truths that were plaguing her people. It was the perfect platform for all that she wanted to say.

At first she was a glorified intern, answering phones, keeping schedules, only occasionally writing small articles. Outside of the office, she pounded the pavement. Tracy plugged *The Real* at every event. She rubbed every shoulder, kissed every cheek, tweeted and instagrammed everything.

*Always Want More*

There was a celebrity basketball tournament at the Rucker. Tracy, along with hundreds of other people, watched from against a metal fence. She panned her camera around the crowd and panned back to the court. Cam'ron caught a fast break, cut to the basket and dunked the ball. The crowd roared. Tracy turned the phone towards herself. "The Rucker is just as live as I imagined it would be. Can you say New York City?" She uploaded the video to Instagram and tagged *The Real* and Cam'ron to it.

It took forever to make it out. Warm greetings were shouted out as men slapped each other up; the crowd moved and swayed to accommodate them. She bumped into Lindsay, a burgeoning fashion stylist. "Hey girl, what you doing tonight?"

Tracy shrugged. "Can't call it. Why, what's up?"

"Roll with me to Perfections."

"What's that?"

"Damn, how long you've lived here? It's a strip club." She waved her hand. "All of these niggas will be there."

"Ok, cool."

Lindsay met her at her place around 1 am. She made a disapproving face at Tracy's outfit. "Girl, uh unhh."

Tracy looked down at herself. She thought she looked sexy, but classy in an electric blue tube skirt and white wife beater. "What?"

"I know you're Miss Writer and all, but you look like somebody's secretary. She made Tracy swap out the wife beater for a turquoise camisole and step into gold stilettos. She finished the look with a chunky gold necklace. "Now you look like someone a nigga would want to interview him." Tracy couldn't help but agree. And after the shots of tequila that they slammed back, she was ready to make it a night. Lindsay had arranged for some dudes that she knew to pick them up. They raced towards Queens and passed around a fifth of Hennessey.

It was dark inside. Beautiful women who ranged from Serena Williams thick to Eva Pigford model sexy roamed around like gazelles. On stage, a Puerto Rican dancer with an ass that would put Jennifer Lopez to shame, bent over and made it clap. A familiar stirring rose in Tracy's loins. Men in the crowd crumpled up

bills and threw them at her. The dudes they rode with promptly ditched them and Lindsay began acting out her stripper fantasies. She twerked alongside the bar and laughed in the face of every guy who paid her attention. It worked for Tracy. Every time a man offered Lindsay a drink she insisted on one for her and before long Tracy was zoned out and screaming along to the music. “You say no to ratchet pussy/Juicy J can’t!”

The lights came up at four. Tracy and Lindsay linked arms in an attempt to sober and steady themselves. They made it to the door before they remembered that they didn’t drive. They had no idea where their ride was.

“Let me call them.” Lindsay frowned into her phone. “It keeps going to voicemail.”

Tracy laughed. “How do you know them anyway?”

“Well I used to fuck with the real tall one, but he always comes too quick. He’s chill though. We kick it from time to time.”

Tracy spotted Cam’ron walking towards the exit. Her heart quickened a bit. What if she got a story tonight? She laughed to herself. Six months in the city and she would be drunk and in a strip club when she lucked upon her first feature. That would be an interesting context though. “Fuck it, let’s get a ride with him.” She walked over and tapped him on the shoulder. “Cam, can me and my girl get a ride back to Harlem?”

He searched her face. “Ay yo, where I know you from?”

Warmth spread through her body and she couldn’t stop the smile that captured her entire face. “You’ve probably seen me around, maybe online. I write for *The Real*.” She laughed. “Actually, you would be my first real story.”

“Your first huh?” Tracy nodded, the smile would still not leave her face. “Yeah I know you, you caught my dunk earlier. A lot of the shit you post is ill.”

Tracy motioned over to Lindsay. “Who you with? Is it cool if we ride?”

Cam’ron nodded over to his friend. “Just me and my man. Pooch, is it cool if they ride?”

*Always Want More*

“Hell yeah.” Pooch promptly put his arm around Lindsay and they all made their way to the parking lot. Tracy spotted Lindsay’s friends helping a blonde into their car. She elbowed Lindsay, who burst into a raucous laugh. She was gone.

Cam stopped in front of a drop top Mercedes. “Pooch, how ’bout you and home girl hit the back seat?”

“Hell yeah.”

Cam’ron headed towards the passenger door. This time he spoke to Tracy. “You drunk too?”

Tracy quickly straightened herself. “I don’t get drunk.”

“Cool, ’cause I am. Can you drive stick?”

“I can drive anything.” Tracy slid into the driver seat, put the car into 2<sup>nd</sup> and sped off. Cam pressed a button, the top went back, and the moonless sky enveloped her. It was the most fun she ever had. When they emerged from the Triboro Bridge Tracy pulled in front of IHOP. Cam looked around.

“Aren’t you hungry? Come on let’s leave them and me and you get something to eat.”

Pooch sounded his agreement from the back seat. “Hell yeah.”

Inside their booth, Cam sat with his back against the wall and his legs spread out in the seat. Tracy removed her tape recorder from her clutch. “How is it that you’ve remained relevant for so long?”

The conversation flowed well and over pancakes and coffee, Tracy’s cherry was popped.

Tracy met Lindsay for drinks a couple of weeks later. Tracy lifted her glass to her. “Girl last time I saw you, your legs were hanging out of a backseat.”

Lindsay smacked her teeth. “Bitch, that was weeks ago. On to the next. Let me order a fat ass drink ’cause I’m doing a seven day cleanse starting tomorrow.”

“You look good. You could tighten your stomach a little, but just lay off the bread. Cleansing has too many ups and downs. It’s better to be consistent.”

“Yeah you can say that because you’re not around these model bitches all day and these stuck up designers.”

“I guess you got me beat there.”

“Yep, but one of those designers, who shall remain nameless, slept with one of Diddy’s producers, fucked around and fell in love, and just found out the nigga is engaged. She gave me her two tickets.”

Tracy perked up in her seat. “To what? To the all-white party?” Lindsay nodded. Tracy stood up and did a shimmy. “Oh yeah.”

“Don’t act like you haven’t been before.”

Tracy bounced her shoulders up and down. “Fuck that, I’m not acting. I haven’t been before.”

“No one ever told me that niggas in Rochester are country.”

“And no one ever told me that niggas in the city don’t appreciate shit. I guess sometimes you have to see things for yourself.” Lindsay fronted like Tracy embarrassed her, but she kept inviting her to places.

“Ok little Miss appreciative, you should let me style you for the day.” Tracy hesitated. “What? Bitch, you should be thanking me. Everyone knows I got skills.”

Lindsay found Tracy the perfect dress in a vintage shop in Park Slope. She made her an appointment at a Dominican shop on 118<sup>th</sup> although she still insisted that Tracy “needed to lose the India Arie bullshit and have some tracks sewn in.” They had a brunch of bagels and tequila spiked orange juice the day of the party. “Okay, come on let me work my magic.” Lindsay zipped her into her dress and applied double sided tape to the arm straps. “Remember, it’s all about the fit.” She used finishing spray on Tracy’s now straightened hair and put concealer under her eyes before whisking a brush along her cheeks. “You already have wonderful skin, but a little concealer and blush goes a long way.” Lindsay coached her on how to stand, but when she passed her a pair of five inch stilettos, Tracy held up a hand in protest.

“Uh no. Aren’t we going to be on grass all day?”

“So?”

“So? So, I need to be comfortable and relaxed. This might be my big break.”

“Bitch, you already got your big break. Cam’ron.”

“Interviewing a rapper after an evening at the strip club isn’t exactly original or provocative. That’s not what I came to New York for.”

Lindsay snorted. “Whatever, just try not to get too star struck on me.” Tracy ignored her and reached for a pair of teal wedges. “Those actually work. Okay hurry up, the car should be here any minute.” Lindsay bounced up and crossed the room with hurried steps. Tracy turned to follow her, but was stopped by her own reflection. She looked beautiful. She rolled her eyes and laughed. Lindsay did have skills.

Lindsay also talked nonstop all the way to the Hamptons. As the terrain transitioned from steel and glass to grass and sky, butterflies began to dance in Tracy’s stomach. She half-way listened as Lindsay droned on. “This bitch talking ’bout I broke her hair off. No, bitch you broke your hair off. You had me bleach it blonde and then didn’t take care of it. Who the fuck doesn’t know that you have to deep condition your hair every week?”

“You do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Did you tell her that?”

But then Lindsay was on to another subject. Another example of how she was smarter than somebody else and how they were hating on her. Tracy laughed. Lindsay was funny and she did know a lot. Well, she knew a lot about make-up and fashion and celebrity gossip. Her life was fast paced and her mind moved too quickly to ever consider matters of importance. The car stopped.

Lindsay was on the moment they stepped out. She tossed her head back and headed straight towards the step and repeat. Tracy hung back. She couldn’t have asked for a more beautiful day. The sky was a delicate powder blue and the sun was warm and welcoming. Everything around them was green and lush. Tracy took a long inhale. She hadn’t realized how much she needed a break from the city.

A man came from behind her and threw his arm around her shoulder. Tracy looked up at him in surprise. Busta Rhymes was grinning back at her. “Good shit, huh shorty?”

Tracy laughed. “Yeah.”

“This your first time?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay cool, Imma show you how it’s done.” He grabbed Tracy’s hand and directed her towards the step and repeat. Cameras flashed. “Busta over here, look this way.” Tracy watched him pose. He started off with his face scrunched into a grimace, his hands clasped before him. He yelled over to Tracy. “I like to start with my hardcore shit.” He grinned as she laughed and struck a more comical pose. “But fuck that, it’s all about the fun. Ay yo, get a picture of me and my shorty.” Tracy joined him and hollered as he lifted her off of her feet. Cameras flashed. He put her down and she wrapped her arms around his waist and smiled brightly. “Bust, what’s her name?” Tracy stopped smiling and looked directly at the gruff man who asked the question. “Tracy Mitchell, representing *The Real*.” She put a hand on her hip and smiled over her shoulder for one more picture.

Busta was waiting for her when she was done. “You write for *The Real*? You must be really good, that’s a dope mag.” He kissed her on the cheek. “Don’t have too much fun, ma.”

Around the grounds people sat or stood in clumps. She grabbed a drink and watched them. The athletes were the loudest, the models hardly talked at all, and it seemed like everyone else couldn’t stop talking. People were smiling, but something about it felt stiff. This was the biggest hip-hop event of the year and she had absolutely no desire to work the crowd today. Today she was going to have fun. She finished her drink and closed her eyes and rocked to the music. A waiter stopped to offer her an appetizer, but she didn’t recognize what he was holding out to her. “What is—“

“It’s Moroccan spiced salmon and it’s good.” Ashton Kutcher stepped in front of her, grabbed one, and walked off. Tracy shrugged, smiled at the waiter, and plopped one into her mouth. It was good. The flavors seemed to jump off of her tongue.

She milled around after that. She spotted Lindsay a couple of times, but didn’t go to her. Instead, she tasted everything that was offered to her. After seven servings, and three glasses of cham-

pagne she was full and a little tipsy. She walked a bit up a grassy hill whose incline let her see the festivities, but gave her a good distance from them. Unfolding and sitting on the oversized handkerchief she brought for just this purpose, she felt at peace. She opened her purse, pulled out a joint, and took a long inhale.

She took too big of a pull and ended up in a coughing fit. A woman spoke behind her. "Easy, Tiger." She turned to see Nicki Minaj, a female rapper who was making her way up the ranks, standing there. "Damn you brought a blanket? That's a good idea."

Tracy scooted over. "You can sit down."

Nicki sat down slowly, filling up every available inch of the handkerchief. They were shoulder to shoulder. She crossed her legs in front of her and nodded towards the party. "Looks like they're having fun."

"Aren't you?"

"I'm working. Manager told me I gotta make sure everyone sees me, make sure everyone hears my name. I feel like a damn politician."

Tracy exhaled and nodded. "Well Nicki, I already know your name so you can relax. Want some?" She held the joint out to her. Nicki took it and blew out a graceful gush of smoke. "I've never heard a female spit like you."

"Yeah, how's that?" She passed Tracy the joint back.

"You have moments where you spit hard like Fox or Kim, but it's something completely different. You don't really do that gangsta bitch stuff. And yeah you got that New York Carribean flow, but it's more—"

"Theatrical."

"Yeah theatrical. That's exactly it."

"Theatre inspires me. I want to bring those characters to hip-hop."

Tracy passed the joint back to her. "Characters in hip-hop?"

"Yeah, look around, all of this is fake. They want everyone to think it's real, but be quick to say it's entertainment. Entertainment. They're characters paid to amuse and distract. I get it. But me, I'm gonna flip it. The whole world gonna know I'm acting and

they're all going to fucking love it." She tilted her head back and exhaled. Then she snapped her head, smiled, and batted her eyes at Tracy. When she spoke it was in a strange British accent. "And they all gonna know that I'm directing the show darling."

Tracy looked over at her and then back at the crowd. She watched as Just Blaze told a joke, watched the gorgeous women around him laugh—some girlishly boisterous, some demure and restrained. All of it on cue. To the right of them, three punk rock dudes looked cool and unkempt even in their white. As Tracy watched them, she noticed that the tallest one took a sip from his drink robotically, like his arm was programmed to raise the glass to his lips every six seconds. She looked back at Nicki. "All the world's a stage', right?"

Nicki smiled and nodded. "Yep. That's why I'm gonna wear a mask."

"That's not theatrical, that's gimmicky."

Nicki rolled her head towards her. "Nah, the mask Paul Laurence Dunbar was talking about. The mask is gonna protect me. I can look out from it, but no one can see in." She waved her hand towards the crowd. "I'm not going to let any of this touch me."

Tracy nodded and pulled out her recorder. "Well, I gotta let you know that I write for *The Real*. You should let me interview you."

Nicki looked her straight in the eye and held her gaze. She flicked the remnants of the joint. "Fuck it, why not?" The interview was ill. That was Nicki's first major cover story and it took her career to the next level. Tracy followed her evolution and felt proud of and sad for her.

Of course, that story did wonders for Tracy's career too. She instantly became the editor in chief's favorite. Jimmie sent her to Italy to interview Common. She was flabbergasted. "You're sending me to do it?"

"Who else would I send? Our ad sales tripled after the Minaj issue." He stared straight at her. "But more than that, your piece said something. You managed to use the music to expose the politics. You were direct, but subtle. That's why I started this magazine."

*Always Want More*

Tracy nodded. Her face warmed with pride. This was why she was here. Her dream was coming true.

And Common was the most interesting man she ever met. They strolled around the Piazza Navona, and then dined on mussels and clams. He smiled as he talked, but Tracy couldn't hear him, all of her focus was on his lips. She had to remind herself that she was at work, not on a date. Yet, when Common took her hand and led her back into the perfumed evening, butterflies danced in her stomach. They walked in silence towards the main drag and stopped alongside the road. Their eyes met. She was ready to say yes to whatever he said. He turned from her a bit and hailed a taxi. Her heart sunk. He opened the door for her. "I had a really good time, it's just---"

Tracy interrupted him. "It's just an interview." She managed to get in the cab before her tears came. That night, she could not sleep. She tucked a pillow in between her legs, but it was not enough to suppress the wanting. She got up, took a cold shower, and sat in front of her laptop. Once beams of sunlight streaked into the room, she gave up on capturing the magic she had felt. It was gone now anyway. She ended up with a direct piece that juxtaposed Common's influence on hip-hop and film to Italy's romance and poetry.

If she wasn't writing, she was tracking down stories, or had her sleeves rolled up alongside Jimmie.

"What the fuck type of lead in is this?" He read, "*Though devilishly handsome, it is Nasir Jones' quiet introspections that gets panties wet.*" Who the fuck wants to read that?"

"Our readers. And if you read the research that you pass off to me, you would know that forty percent of them are female. And I don't need any stats to tell me that that's going to double with this issue. Nas is the sex symbol of a whole generation of women. I wrote the damn thing and I still might buy a copy."

"Fucking groupie."

"Hater."

But Jimmie was cool and he was passionate as hell. He wrangled with A&R's and publicists to secure artists, shook down folks to sell ad space, personally edited each piece, and in a pinch even

did graphic design. Tracy wanted to learn everything that he knew. A year quickly flew by.

She interviewed Drake over linguine and Chianti. Disembarking the train at 125<sup>th</sup> street she felt like weeping. What had she done to deserve this life? This was everything. She stopped and got a cup of coffee from the bodega before climbing the three flights of stairs to her apartment. Her apartment was tiny and the stairs were a menace after a long night, but it was hers. She kicked off her boots and flung her coat over the futon. A scratched mahogany desk took up most of dining/living room. On top of it, her laptop beckoned to her. She stripped down to her camisole and panties, rotated her neck, and sat down to what she knew was going to be a long night.

At first her fingers trickled across the keyboard, struggling to keep up with her ever changing thoughts. A couple of times she was stuck; reduced to biting her nails and muttering to herself. An idea would finally take hold and then she pecked slowly, struggling to find the words that captured the essence of what she wanted to say. She finished her first draft at 5am and slept until noon. She showered, jumped into skintight jeans and an oversized sweater, blended concealer under her eyes, wrapped a turquoise scarf around her untamed mane and headed to the office. She walked a block north and then joined the surge of people descending into the earth. Below they waited for the train. A pretty Japanese girl was cocooned into her own world, courtesy of Beats by Dre. Two older men sat on the bench. They argued over a crossword puzzle. A teenage boy had his arms wrapped around his very pregnant girlfriend. Tracy wondered what the Japanese girl was listening to. She wouldn't have been surprised if it was Drake. Hmm. She took her notepad out. Maybe she could work that into her article. The train came and she pushed her way on and slid into an open seat. The aluminum cage rattled along steel tracks and her pen ran furiously over the pad. Phrases kept shouting to her. At this rate, she could probably submit her draft tomorrow. Good. Jimmie had been riding her hard these days. It was like he had lost all consideration for the creative process.

*Always Want More*

*The Real* was housed in a plain faced office building in Concourse Village. A magazine as fanatical about hip-hop history and culture as they were, couldn't have been anywhere but the Bronx. The security guard in the lobby waved to Tracy. She walked down the hall and opened the third door on the left. She used to love coming here, used to love passing the fiberglass sign that spelled out *The Real* in graffiti letters. Now there were ten people who worked there and a constant cloud of noise. It was like there was a contest to see who could talk the loudest. Today, she needed to show her face and let Jimmie know that the story was coming.

She opened her laptop and checked her email. Iman, one of her line sisters had just gotten engaged. Tracy smiled and clicked away her congratulations. Cool. A wedding in DC would be a nice reunion for them. Lord knows there weren't going to be any weddings in Harlem any time soon. She hadn't had a good date in months. Well she had had a perfect date, but it couldn't be a date because it was work. Jimmie was talking on his cell phone when he walked past her desk. Tracy smiled and gave him a thumbs up. He nodded and kept moving. She waited five minutes before packing up and leaving.

She grabbed a coffee and hiked the eight blocks to the library. The hollow stillness calmed her and words gushed through her fingertips. Three hours later, she finished the draft with a smile. On Monday she and Jimmie would argue over the editing, but right now she was triumphant.

She decided to write another piece while the iron was hot. She blogged occasionally for *On the Rag*, a feminist newsletter that covered every topic from dating to sex slavery. Today she penned 500 words about how to have a good hook up. *"If you find yourself horny and bored or even lonely and resigned, it's probably time for a good hook-up; your battery needs to be recharged. Remember ladies, a hook-up is not a one-night stand. No one is talking you into it. You are in control. So dress for the type of night you want to have. You're not about to meet your husband; you're going to meet a new penis. Show some skin. When you see your reflection, your own response should be, "Damn!" Then go out and own that night. Dance as much as you want to; drink as much as*

*you can handle. Then find the hottest guy in the bar and stare him down, I guarantee he will walk over to you. Now all you have to do is tell him how you like it. This is your night; he better fuck you right.* She rattled off the rest and headed back to Harlem, her mouth watering for a fish fry. Though she was ever conscious of maintaining her size eight figure—thick enough to keep a brother’s attention, but slim enough to catch a white guy’s eyes, she had an inner fat girl that had to be satiated.

Lenox Lounge not only had the best fish fry in Harlem, it would also be a great setting for her video blog—“New Girl in the City.” After receiving such tremendous feedback on her social networking pages, she decided to launch a blog of herself frequenting different food spots in New York. Her last post of drunken exploits at the 24 hour seafood spot on 125<sup>th</sup> had gotten over 5,000 views. Today’s post would be calmer. She took a seat at the counter, propped her Go Pro up and began talking. “Welcome to another episode of New Girl in the City. I’m Tracy and right now I’m at Lenox Lounge, home of the best fish fry in the City. Ain’t that right Tony?” She turned her camera towards the grumpy waiter who had just taken her order.

“Get that shit outta my face.”

Tracy laughed and turned the camera back towards her. “I didn’t say the service was great, but the food will make you slap your mama.” Her phone buzzed. It was Francois, a Haitian line cook she was seeing. She kept talking to the camera. “I don’t know why this guy keeps calling me.” She let it ring for a moment before putting it on speaker phone.

“Hello?”

“Damn, I thought I was about to watch you ignore my call. That would have been depressing.”

She swiveled around in her seat as he walked up to her. He kissed her full on the mouth. “Hey, pretty lady.”

She broke the embrace quickly and smiled tightly at him. “I suppose absence does make the heart grow fonder.”

“Especially when it’s forced on you. Woman, I’ve been calling you.”

“And I’ve been busy. Say hi to the camera.”

He faltered for a bit, but then plastered on a grin. “Hi, world. I am Francois, one of the best chefs in the city. Ask my girl here—“

Tracy scooted closer to him. “He definitely has skills. No one is cooking like my man. His food is soulful, but has precision; everything is so well balanced, cooked to perfection. If you’re ever in the city, make sure you check him out at Kingston’s on Broadway and 7<sup>th</sup>.” Francois was cool so she didn’t mind bigging him up. He made her jerk chicken quesadillas on their second date that were so good she let him eat her afterwards. Unfortunately, she lost all interest after she came. He kept calling and she wanted to like him, but there was just no spark.

Her food arrived. She ate it slowly, seductively, as she narrated into the camera. “I wish y’all could taste this. The seasoning is bold, but delicate.” She licked her fork. “And the texture, crisp on the outside, but soft and warm in the inside.”

Francois threw an arm around her. “Yes, it’s very soft and very warm in the inside. That’s the best part.”

She rolled her eyes. “Alright folks, thanks for watching. This new girl in the city is out.” Francois handled the check and she promised to call him.

She went home changed into a tube dress and blazer and headed to Shrine. The sound of a bluesy bass guitar greeted her as she slid inside. A sexy brother with dreads eyed her. She held his gaze and smiled at him. After five minutes, she gave in and ordered a drink. He sidled over to her soon after that. Of course his cheap ass waited to approach her until after she bought her own drink. She knew that trick.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t stop watching you. You are really beautiful.”

Tracy smiled. “And I’m sorry, but I’m really not interested.”

She turned from him and stayed and watched four acts. Then she hopped a train and met some girls in Time Square. They drank pitchers of margaritas in The Lounge, a chill mixed spot that had hip-hop karaoke. It was a little hokey, but funny as hell. They left and cabbied it and went to a party in Soho. She got home around

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

four, but was still restless. She grabbed her phone and scrolled through some texts before putting it down again.

The next day she climbed the fire escape to the top of her building, lit a joint, and looked over at the city. This was her weekly ritual. Harlem was quiet on Sundays. At first she attributed that to the ingrained reverence Blacks have for the Lords day. She liked that. Then she started to liken it to the only rest day of the slaves. That she did not like.

\* \* \*

Two more years went by. *The Real* was doing better than ever. Bigger artists came and so did an even bigger staff and so went the familial intimacy. There was always a hoop to jump through now. There were more publicists trying to steer the direction of her interviews, more ankle grabbing to secure artists, fewer pieces about social issues. Jimmie would not relent with the editing now. The witty edge in her pieces was whittled down to passive aggressive musings. This was not *The Real* that she had loved. This was not why she had come to New York.

She could see now where *The Real* ended and where she began. She made time to date. Her schedule and social circle eliminated regular guys. If she wanted to have longevity in her career, artists—no matter how much of a gentleman they were or how sexy they looked when an Italian moon danced on their features—were out. So were music execs. Athletes were cool, but often too self-absorbed for anything substantial. Financial guys were the worst and actors were just strange.

There was always something to do and Tracy was determined to not let anyone outwork her. Though she was in the center of the music she had loved so much, she found herself trapped outside from all of it. At album release parties, music blared and pills and liquor flowed, and she didn't feel a thing. At concerts, she watched everyone with their arms raised and wondered just what they were celebrating. At radio parties, jokes were told and she laughed, but

*Always Want More*

it didn't warm her. Something didn't feel right. It wasn't fun anymore. She was always tired, always stressed, and less and less proud of every new issue. She found herself crying out to God again. She didn't know how long she could keep this up and she didn't know what else to do.

The Tragic interview broke up her fog. 3,000 miles up in the air she reviewed her notes, tried to get a feel for who he really was. She knew he was a church kid, born and raised in Oakland, played three instruments, did a tour in Iraq. And she really dug his music. His first mixtape was an underground smash that even had Brooklyn heads nodding. No one could deny that he could spit. His political commentary was reminiscent of Nas, his playarific tales rang of Too Short. Tragic could just as easily rap about fucking hoes as raising Black men to have honor. He was a breath of fresh air and was quickly signed to a mega label and immediately deemed the protégé of Skillz, a legendary rapping producer. Though Skillz' production was the perfect backdrop for Tragic's flow, Tracy wondered if there was a riff there. Sonship didn't seem like Tragic's style. That could be her angle.

She closed her notes and looked out of the tiny hole that was masquerading as a window. The sky was a dreamy blue that sent her mind to daydreaming. She should take a vacation. She should go somewhere and let the ocean heal her. But she didn't have anybody to go with. She pulled the window shade down.

Her mind was back on business as soon as the plane started its descent. Tragic had been communicating with Tracy sans publicist or assistant and insisted on picking her up from the airport. She was barreling towards ground transportation, shades on, phone to her ear, prepared for him to be late, when she saw him walking towards her. He hugged her before taking her carry-on bag. "It's good to finally meet you."

Tracy smiled. He was real. Unassuming in his khaki shorts, white tee, and Adidas they made it to his car unmolested by fans. The car itself, a Saturn Astra, was not likely to give them away. Tracy put on her seat belt. "I see you're low key. Or is all of this just for my benefit?"

“Shit, it’s for my benefit. I got a daughter and I don’t plan on ever having to blow motherfuckas up in order to feed her again.”

“Yeah I read somewhere that she’s the reason why you enlisted. Good thing for her conscience that you made it back.”

“She wouldn’t have ever known about that.”

Tracy turned to look at him. “I guess your family’s not like mine. With us, every sacrifice is published, the appropriate appreciation must be paid.” She put her fingers on her cheeks and lifted to fake a smile.

He laughed. “Guess you know a little something about that.”

She knew a lot about that. Her future had been planned and prayed for since the moment her mother realized she was pregnant. When she was fourteen her father had worked enough double shifts at Kodak and her mother had cleaned enough houses to move them from their apartment that was a stone’s throw away from the projects, to a pocketbook house in Brighton, a suburb with the best school district in the county. Every other penny had been saved for her education. She went to the University of Pennsylvania instead of Howard, but was happy to make her parents so proud. Of course, the shoe dropped on graduation day when she announced she was moving to Harlem to write instead of going to law school. This time she would not be dissuaded. She had done her duty, the rest of her life would be for her.

“Used to. My parents moved back to Guyana last year. Hallelujah, I can breathe!” She laughed. “What about you? You close to your folks?”

“We starting the interview all ready? I can’t feed you first?”

He parked the car on Seventh Avenue. Walking towards Jesse’s, a natural soul food restaurant that he swore could put Sylvia’s out of business, Tracy could barely contain herself. She could just envision the zoot suites of the ‘50s, Bobby Seale walking the street in his black leather in the 60s, afro glistening in the sunshine. She wanted to soak it all in.

Inside, the smell of fried chicken and framed photographs greeted them. A few patrons sat along a glistening counter. A plump woman with a huge smile and gap to match spoke. “Hey Blake, go

ahead and have a seat.” Tracy followed him to a booth in the back. He slid down across from her. “First time in Oakland?”

She laughed. “Is it that obvious? I’m sorry, but this is so exciting. A major movement in history, started right here. Were your parents panthers?” She motioned toward his right forearm; which was covered with a mural. She made out RIP dates and images of Tupac, Malcolm X, Bible verses, army tanks, bubble letters, an infant’s face, and Huey Newton.

“No. In the beginning people used to be scared by all of that. Niggas talking about communism and self-sovereignty, and there being no God, no one wanted to be associated with that. It didn’t get fashionable until the leather and guns came out. Towards the end there were too many rules, too many bodies, and too much talk. Niggas got tired of listening to that shit.” He rubbed his arm. “All of this right here is just a physical manifestation of everything that has gotten me here.”

“You ever worry that niggas will get sick of listening to you?”

“I never wanted them to listen to me in the first place. I’ve been shy my whole life, always stayed to myself. This rapping shit is a complete and total accident. I started spitting when I was first shipped to Iraq. Lupe said ‘Hip-hop saved my life.’ That is some real shit. I woulda went crazy had I kept all of this in. It just kept coming out. All of it. But there you go trying to start the interview again.”

She tilted her digital tape recorder towards him. “The interview been started. You forgot what I’m here for?”

He took the recorder from her and pressed stop. “Not yet. Let me feed you first, show you my city. How you gon interview somebody you don’t know?”

She raised her hands in surrender. He was cool. And when Jesse herself placed a steaming plate of fried catfish, rice, black eyed peas and greens flavored with organic smoked turkey, she didn’t have any protests. The food was just as amazing as he said.

She spent the entire day with him. On their way to his barber he beeped his horn at a stocky dude on a bike. “What up ol’ big head ass nigga.”

The guy on the bike laughed jovially. “Same shit my nigga.”

Tragic chuckled him a deuce and sped back up. “That nigga’s sister used to suck everybody off.” In the mall, he slapped some dudes up, nodded at a few females, and stopped for a couple of pictures. Seeing him here was no unusual occurrence. In the sneaker store, a bow-legged kid with freckles in a striped uniform handed Tragic a box of sneakers before he could even open his mouth. “Good look, Tony. Tell your mama I said hey.” This was his first hometown performance since going major, but it was obvious that he was no stranger to his city. They went to his weed man and then back to his ranch style home in a middle class neighborhood to change.

“Make yourself at home.” Her eyes darted around the moment he disappeared down the hallway. Pink Converse were next to the door. In the kitchen, a fourth grade report card was on the refrigerator and a six pack of Heineken and a pizza box were the only things inside. Back in the living room a picture of a snaggletooth girl smiled at her from the mantel. She wondered what type of father he was. The sound of his steps behind her interrupted her thoughts. She turned to face him. He still had on his clothes from earlier, but he added a thick rope chain and the new sneakers.

“You look good. How come you don’t have a picture up of you with your daughter?”

He shrugged. “I’m home now. I don’t need pictures.”

They headed to the arena. She was surprised that they hadn’t linked up with any of his homies. Most of the artists she met hated being alone. “Where’s your entourage? They meeting us up there?”

He laughed. “What entourage? Niggas stopped fucking with me when I came home. I was fucked up, bad. I was on pain meds, drunk, high all of the time. Used to just zone out. They told me I used to say some wild shit. And I’m a mean drunk, started wailing on ’em. Can’t blame niggas for not dealing with that. I don’t blame my baby mom either.”

“What about now?”

“Now I’m good. But I don’t have no friends, don’t have no girl. It’s just me and this music. I might roll one up, kick it, look out when niggas need help. But I don’t have no one around me.”

She held out her recorder. “Except for journalists.”

*Always Want More*

Again he clicked the device off. “Just vibe with me man. You’re not going to deny a fan are you?”

“You’re a fan?”

“Oh yeah. You write some real shit. Like, some mags kiss artists ass. Your stuff is positive, but there’s an edge to it. It’s like you hold a camera up to motherfuckas, and you ain’t photo shoppin’ shit.”

Heat ran to Tracy’s face. He was a fan of *her* work. “Thank you.”

“No doubt. And those videos you make are funny as hell. That’s why I was hyped to meet you. You seem like a fun person to be around.”

Tracy watched him as he spoke. A lot of artists liked to kiss up to her, wanting her to paint them in the most favorable light. Tragic seemed sincere though. Shit, she was fun. She wasn’t walking around with a stick up her ass, afraid to have a good time. Maybe it was New York that had been bothering her. A change of scenery and a new friend might be just what she needed. She shrugged. “Yeah I am.”

He laughed. “That’s what I’m talking about. I like your energy. I need that right now. Just build with me. You can start the interview the second I get off stage. I promise.”

His show was amazing. It felt more like a one man Broadway play than a rap concert. There were no hype men, just him and his deejay. He led the crowd through songs, stopped to give personal anecdotes about the making of the music, the time he got pistol whipped after he tried to rip off a dealer, the friends he had lost. Then the Skillz produced electric guitar chords of his newest single dropped. He jumped up and down, ran across the stage. He screamed into the mic “All I got is this here pen/And if I die, Lord please let me in/Soul so dark, heart full of sin.” Tracy was mesmerized. A host of new questions came to her mind.

Tragic was covered in sweat when he met her backstage. He lifted Tracy off of her feet and swung her around. She didn’t mind. And when he passed her a blunt she only hesitated for a moment. It wasn’t that she made it a habit to smoke with her interviewees, but she felt like she had made a new friend. She needed that right

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

now. Plus, there was no way she could refuse some Cali weed; that would almost be sinful.

\* \* \*

She was floating, boundless; suspended in a nothingness. Then light began to trickle in. At first she was puzzled by it, a bit intrigued by its spreading presence. But then it was the only thing she could feel and she was awake. She opened her eyes. Where was she? She was laid out on a bed. It was still made. Her eyes quickly roamed over the room. She was in a hotel. Was she alone? Her heart quickened. Everything was quiet save for the sound of a distant vacuum cleaner. She gingerly ran her hands over her body. She was fully clothed. When she got to her face, there was something wet, something thick. Oh God. She hurred. For a few moments, her body heaved in convulsions. Then she was drenched in sweat, crying and gagging until there was nothing else to come out.

She closed her eyes and tried to remember. She remembered Tragic swinging her around after the show, her coughing after hitting the blunt, their laughter. She noticed the tape recorder on the night stand. She stared at it, afraid of what it might say. Finally, she crawled over to it and pressed play. His voice sounded distant, haunted. “Everybody so shocked that I made it on the scene so fast. They don’t understand that I was sent here. This was destined.”

Her own voice was feathery. “Sent here?”

“My steps are ordered. Everything that I been through. My pops was a pastor used to beat the shit outta me and quote Scripture. ‘Chasten thy son while there is hope, and let not thy soul spare for his crying.’ Now I don’t know if the good book meant that you break your kid’s ribs. But apparently it did, because nobody did nothing.”

He went on to tell her about his first excursion in Fallujah. “Niggas here think they know about war. They think their little pea shooters and petty ass beef is a war. No, a war is when you suit up in 110 degree heat and march down a street whose name you can’t

*Always Want More*

even pronounce and an IED goes off and you see your man torn in half, literally torn in half. Intestines oozing out. That's war."

The conversation lightens when he speaks of his daughter. "That little girl is a straight character. She's girly as hell, only wears dresses, but at the same time she's a little tomboy. I mean she got a mean cross over. Imagine a little girl breaking someone's ankles in a dress." Tracy could make out the sound of her own laughter, it was throaty and short. The interview darkens again when she asks about his mom. "It'll be the best day of my life when that bitch dies." But it wasn't until near the end of the recording that her blood ran cold.

"Yo, what the fuck did we smoke?"

"A little of this, a little of that. Welcome to the West Coast nigga."

Her voice is panicked. "What?"

"Don't trip, go with it. Relax your mind baby. That's what we do with this music. Right beat, right flow, we can say anything. We ease it in, nice and smooth, you hardly feel it." He started to freestyle. "Niggas is tripping/'cause when my pen get to leaking/the demons in my head take over/start barking and speaking/Hot bitch/Fat ass/So we freakin' this weekend/legs part/soul open/that's when I sneak in." He laughed. "We get over a million motherfuckas singing along to that and we got something."

"We got a war playing out in front of everybody and they all pretend not to see it. It doesn't matter how many YouTube videos people make, how many of our secrets get leaked, no one believes it, no one cares. We read the little chats and laugh. People talkin' bout, 'They don't mean it like that.' What the fuck else could we mean?"

"We?"

"I told you I was sent here. I was six months in. They sent us to disable some bombs. I hadn't even been trained in that shit yet. They talking 'bout it's field experience. Half a kilometer in, one detonates. I don't remember the rest. One minute I'm walking, sweating from the heat and nerves; the next minute I'm in the infirmary. Skull cracked. It was touch and go for a few weeks. But someone came to see me."

“Who?”

“He told me that I would rap. That he would give me the words and that my music would pierce hearts.”

“Who?”

“He said I would win souls for him. He said that the music is just the beginning. By the time the battle comes we’ll have enough people on our side.”

The recording stopped there and though it was over three hours long, she didn’t remember any of it. When she sat down at her laptop to write the story her hands shook. She didn’t want to listen to the tape again; she didn’t want to think about the things Tragic had said. She didn’t want to think about what wasn’t on the tape.

He said a battle was coming and she believed him. Something had been off recently. She felt something different when she listened to the music. It was almost like a presence, like an aroma that only she could smell. She would look at those around her and see that they were totally unaffected. So she dismissed it until she sat down with an artist and felt its presence again. And there it was when she opened a final copy of *The Real*. Something tugged at her. It whispered secrets into her ear. The real music had been kidnapped. What stood in its place was an evil impostor. Hip-hop was no longer the music of the people. It no longer gave a voice to the abandoned and disenfranchised.

The new hip-hop, the clever impostor, had millions hypnotized through super powered headphones and lulled into a false consciousness. In this grim fantasy, love was ridiculed, women were fucked, and money was plentiful. Real niggas didn’t hold hands or have feelings or give a fuck about anybody else. Ex correctional officers were rapping about flipping bricks and teenagers were spitting “bang bang” and niggas were dying in the streets. Souls were being won for the devil.

She slammed her laptop shut. She couldn’t write that. What proof did she have? She wasn’t some half-baked conspiracy theorist or desperate preacher. Maybe she had misunderstood what Tragic said. “People talkin’ bout, ‘They don’t mean it like that.’ What the

fuck else could we mean?” She held her face in her hands. There was no misunderstanding that. He had been very plain all along. All of them had. The enemy was hiding in plain sight.

Tragic was right; the lyrics spoke for themselves. He wasn't using subliminal messages hidden in beats; he was getting people to speak a spell out loud. Tracy had to figure out a way to get people to realize that. She opened her laptop again, but it was like her fingers were frozen. She couldn't type a word. What did she need to say anyway? She would just transpose the tape and let everyone see for themselves. Jimmie probably wouldn't even run it. He had turned into a complete kiss ass recently. She swept her arm across her desk and everything went crashing to the floor. She sobbed into her hands. This would ruin her. But she had become a writer to tell the people the truth. This was why she had dreamed of Harlem her whole life. This was why she was here.

Jimmie called her into his office. For the first few seconds he was silent. Tracy stared back at him. They had come so far together. They had both been searching for something. What that was wasn't revealed until now. But Jimmie looked weary and she could not begrudge him that. Everything was about to change. Finally he spoke. “Are you sure?”

She placed a copy of the recording on his desk and walked out. He ran her story in its entirety.

The backlash was swift and the internet was abuzz. The purists said *The Real* was always too critical of artists. The hipsters said her article was slanted to jump on the illuminati bandwagon. The females said Tracy was a hater who half of the industry had ran through. The preachers said people had too literal an interpretation of the Bible. The Battle of Armageddon was an allegory. And the industry said the story was completely untrue and was a publicity stunt of a desperate mag. Hip-hop was was not intentionally contributing to urban violence; it simply was reporting it. People put too much pressure on rappers; they wanted celebrities to raise their kids. Hip-hop had always been a report on the ghetto, not the cause. It could not be blamed for what was happening in the streets.

Tragic said nothing. He didn't have to. He had wanted that article to be printed, the world's response was confirmation that his plan was working. The music had truly brainwashed them all. The battlefield was ripe.

Jimmie told her it would all blow over. "Take a few days off, don't respond to any of this. No tweets, no statuses, nothing." Two weeks later he called to say she would have to issue a public apology. His tone was stern. "I can't believe I let you talk me into running that piece."

"What are you talking about? I didn't talk you into anything. You heard it for yourself--"

"Yeah? Well, no one believes it."

"Oh they believe it, they just don't give a fuck. That's why you started this magazine. The people need to be woken up! You so busy selling ad space and kissing ass that you're missing the whole fucking point. We are *The Real*. We expose the truth, we shake people when they don't want to hear it. How can we stand by and let these motherfuckas cast spells that are killing our people. These motherfuckas are killing our people! You think the homicide rate in Chicago is an accident? We have to wake everybody up." Her heart beat wildly as she clutched the phone.

Jimmie sounded exhausted on the other end. "Tracy, how can I do that if I don't have a magazine? Tragic's label could shut our lights off. Issue the apology or find another profession." He hung up. She never spoke to Jimmie again.

No other editors were interested in talking to her either. Her emails and calls and even her visits to publications that used to swoon over her were fruitless. No one was available. Even *On the Rag* ignored her. So much for sisterhood. The posts on her social networking were so vicious that she shut them all down. Her bank account was quickly dwindling and her phone was blaringly quiet.

It didn't matter anyway, she could no longer write. She sat in front of her laptop and pecked away but the words were empty, their meaning blank. It was the same thing with her journal, she filled the pages with mad scribbles, the paper ripped where she pressed too hard.

*Always Want More*

She had to do something. She temped, but that money was barely enough to cover rent. She went to see Stephanie, her recruiter at the temp agency.

“I need something that pays more.”

Stephanie’s gray eyes were warm. “Look hon, I like you. You get good reviews from the jobs I send you out on, but unless you get hired directly, there’s nothing I can do.”

Tears welled up in Tracy’s eyes. Her life had been reduced to rubble. She had no friends, no money, no prospects. Hadn’t she done the right thing? Why was everything that she had ever dreamed of being snatched away? She ran her hands over her face. She had to get it together. But she couldn’t stop the tears and soon her entire body was shaking, consumed with her hopelessness.

Stephanie’s words broke through her sorrow. “Have you thought about substitute teaching? The pay is pretty good.”

It took three weeks for her to apply at the New York City Department of Education, be fingerprinted, hired, and then sent on her first teaching gig. Her alarm went off at 6 am, she had never woken up so early in New York before. She showered, dressed and caught the bus to 135<sup>th</sup> street.

The A. Philip Randolph Campus High School was sprawling. She pushed through hundreds of kids waiting to be scanned and admitted. A gruff security guard pointed her towards the main office where she was given a key and directed to the basement. She would be filling in for the shop teacher.

The room was cavernous. Work tables and benches filled the center, while heavy machinery was lined up along the right wall. Bird houses in various stages of completion, were sprawled across a table. What the hell were these kids gonna do with a bird house? Tracy thumbed through the packet of work she was supposed to give them. It had pictures of various tools and screws and a brief description of each. They were supposed to write a paragraph that explained which tools they used to complete their bird houses and why.

The bell rang and Tracy steadied herself. By the time the bell rang again, she had nineteen students sitting before her, sixteen of them boys.

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

“Good morning.” No one returned her salutation. “Well as you can see Mister Moore is out today.”

“And as we can see you fine as hell. Damn baby, what’s your name?”

“Well, it certainly isn’t damn baby. What’s yours?”

“Michael.”

“Okay Michael, read number one.”

He looked at her hard for a second. “These are pliers. Pliers are a hand tool with hinged arms that end in jaws—“

He actually listened to her. But the student next to him was a different story. “I ain’t reading.”

Tracy narrowed her eyes. “Yes, I can definitely tell that you ‘ain’t reading.”

A few students laughed. The boy set his jaw. “Yeah, so move on.”

“Can’t you read?”

“Yeah, bitch I can read.”

“Ooohs” filled the room. “I’m a bitch because you’re either too stupid or too proud to read two sentences in class? Or am I a bitch because I look better than your mama and any chick you could ever bag.” She stared him down. “Is there anything else you want to say?” The class was silent now and Tracy quickly smiled at the student to the right of him. “Why don’t you show him how a real student does it?” The boy obliged her and she blew a deep breath through her nose.

That kid had been so quick to snap on her. He called her a bitch as smoothly as if it were her name. All of that because she asked him to read? Tragic’s words rang in her ear. “We ease it in, nice and smooth, you hardly feel it. Niggas is tripping/’cause when my pen get to leaking/the demons in my head take over/start barking and speaking/Hot bitch/Fat ass/So we freakin’ this weekend/legs part/soul open/that’s when I sneak in. We get over a million motherfuckas singing along to that and we got something.” Children were most affected by hip-hop’s poisoning. They grew up in a world shadowed in spells, their reality was dimmed by materialism and emotional detachment. The end result was an entire generation

*Always Want More*

with no trust, no love. Perhaps there was still hope in trying to reach the youth. Hadn't the future always begun with them?

Everything that she had been through had led to this moment. She had dreamed of Harlem, not because she was supposed to be a writer, but because she was supposed to teach. Her dream wasn't dead after all, it was reincarnated.

She emailed Miss Pratt, her elementary music teacher who used to run the Black History assemblies. Miss Pratt had put Tracy in the choir even though she couldn't sing a lick. Somehow she discovered that Tracy could write. Tracy needed her help again now.

*Miss Pratt, you said I would meet my future one day and I did. Because of you, I became a writer at ten years old. Even after my family moved to the suburbs, and all of my problems were supposed to disappear, the words would not leave me. I marched steadily towards what I knew to be my destiny. I came to Harlem and I used my pen to tell the stories of my people until I discovered a truth that they didn't want to hear, wouldn't dare to believe. I walked to the Brooklyn Bridge on Tuesday. I couldn't step on it though, I feared the desire to jump off would be far too strong. But today a new future greeted me. Today, I became a teacher.*

\* \* \*

Miss Pratt wrote her back and told her all about what was going on in Rochester. There had been four school superintendents in the last ten years, the district was in a severe deficit, extracurricular activities had shrank and the graduation rate had plummeted. "Tracy, we need good teachers. There's an accelerated graduate program that would put you in your own classroom in September."

# 2

*“I do it for the young kids who need to be advised.  
And they wonder why his soul forever cold.  
It was three words that he was never told.”*

-38 Spesh

“These 3 Words”

TRACY DROVE AROUND DOWNTOWN her first day back and gasped when she got to Main Street. What had they done to Midtown? She pulled over and walked up to the remains of what used to be the epicenter of the city. There used to be department stores, All Day Sunday--an upscale urban boutique, a grocery store, a monorail. Dancing dolls from foreign lands used to mark the hour. During Christmas, there was a Black Santa Claus whose wintry land sparkled and beckoned. It used to be magical. She couldn't believe that all of that was reduced to the rubble and the abandoned cranes and trucks that she stood in front of. A man walked past her, “Excuse me, when did they do this?”

He shrugged. “I don't know, maybe two months ago.”

*Always Want More*

She came to learn that a lot more had changed since she had been here last. Low rent was the one good thing about Rochester's decline and she loved her apartment. She would have never been able to afford this much space in Harlem. Nestled on a one-way off of Monroe Avenue, she had the bohemianism that her soul desired and the grim realities of the city's crime at her doorstep. There was a natural food market around the corner and prostitutes in its parking lot at night. Her neighbor had a rainbow flag that hung proudly and dozens of visitors that never stayed for more than five minutes throughout the day. Her place had hardwood floors and big windows and a ceiling with a delightful slope. She filled it with pieces from Craigslist and garage sales and thrift shops; the result was a colorful and warm haven that was telling of her artist soul.

She subbed during the day and went to class at night. Her program was for career changers who wanted to teach in an urban setting. The thought was, trained teachers with real world experience would fare better in the classroom. It was a theory that Tracy didn't completely buy since most of the people in her cohort were idiots. There was Carleen, math wiz, turned housewife, turned would be teacher. She was anxious and patronizing. "I mean those poor dears don't have anybody to show them how to live. I just can't imagine what it's going to be like in the classroom." Then there was Earl. Black, ex jock, and dumb as bricks. "I mean some of them kids real smart. Just gotta know how to apply it. We got crack dealers doing major arithmetic. Just gotta get 'em in the books."

But the course work was fascinating. She learned about educational policy. Gone were the days when the 'slow' kids were in a different class. Brown vs. Board had been reinterpreted by No Child Left Behind. It was discriminatory to place disabled students in separate classrooms. Teachers now had to read and implement students' *individualized educational plans*—thick packets that described the student's deficits and strengths at length and the necessary strategies to accommodate them. She took psychology classes to understand the mindset of teenagers, literacy classes that taught her different ways to increase reading comprehension, assessment classes that taught them how to write lesson plans that met sev-

eral learning styles. She attended seminars on bullying, child abuse, trauma. Statistics cited that 35% of the city's students had experienced trauma, their brains permanently altered because of it.

When she wasn't working or studying, she was restless. She didn't miss the speed of NYC, but she did miss the energy, the potential that lingered in the air. None of the friends that she graduated with were coming back. Rochester was too broke and too slow for them. Most of them landed in Atlanta. Her friends that didn't graduate were too dim for her. They had babies and drama and few aspirations. So she went to sorority meetings, joined a church, worked out, met a fuckable guy named Jason. Spring turned to summer.

The course work intensified and she and the rest of her cohort now had the additional task of student teaching during summer school. It wasn't that taxing for Tracy though. Her cooperative teacher was a very cool guy from Uganda who made it apparent that he wanted to fuck her. His advances were subtle enough that she could pretend not to detect them and he in turn let her do whatever she wanted. He handed her the reigns on her very first day. Later on, she regaled her cohort with stories about how she led the class through grammar exercises, the essential question, and a discussion of *Invictus*. She was certainly feeling like the master of her fate these days. There were endless papers to write and group projects and sample lessons. Bloom's taxonomy, *The First Day of School*, Piaget, and *Strategies that Work* were crammed into her head.

Summer melted away and they eagerly awaited their assignments for the upcoming school year. It was tedious, as the school district struggled to reinstate and place the thousands of seniors who hadn't graduated in August as expected, and had yet to age out of the system. Tracy received her assignment the last class of their summer session and the week before school was to start. She was going to Booker T. Washington.

Earl elbowed her. "Be careful girl, that's the worst school in the city."

Tracy shrugged. "Aren't they all bad?"

*Always Want More*

\* \* \*

At 5:47 a.m, the parking lot of Booker T. Washington High only had three cars in it. The sky was an indigo blue, the moon long gone, the sun making its glorious arrival. The tranquility of the moment calmed her nerves a bit.

Her hands shook on the door handle. She exhaled, "I can do this." Outside of the car, she steadied her hand to swipe her badge at the sensor. A click sounded her admittance into the school.

Her low heels echoed through the hallway. In the office, the head secretary was just taking her seat. She glanced stiffly in Tracy's direction, forcing her to swallow the good morning that was forming in her throat. Tracy turned away and checked her mailbox. It was empty except for a union flier and investment agency advertisement.

She had cleaned and disinfected her classroom the day before, but it still smelled of stale summer. She cracked the window and was rewarded with a gust of twilight air. Rays of amber reached across the sky. The knot in her stomach loosened.

Hurried footsteps came next. A short, Puerto Rican woman stuck her head in the door. "You got the gig."

"I'm sorry?"

The woman smiled. "You were coming in when I left my interview. I prayed that you would get the job."

"I'm sorry, have we met?"

Her visitor stepped into the doorway. "Nope. I just knew that it was the right thing to do. I'm Jahiry. Jahiry Hernandez."

"Tracy Mitchell."

"Lots to do, right? Have a good first day. Let's talk later." She was gone as quickly as she had come.

Soon there were streams of teachers passing by her door. Jen Witfield, a special education teacher, stepped fully into the room. Her eyes roamed over everything before she spoke. "Looks like you're all set up here."

"Just about."

“Just try to survive the first day. Most of these kids are hopeless; we got all of the district’s throwaways. You just remember that no matter what happens, it will be better tomorrow.”

Tracy looked up sharply from the email she had been reading. “It will be better today.”

The knot in her stomach retightened when the buses pulled into the loop. She and a few other teachers stood in the hallway. A perky older brunette winked at her. Tracy smiled in return. A gruff bald man crossed his arms. “Just 190 more days of this shit.” Miss Hernandez waved to her from a few doors down.

Nervous laughter was heard next as students began to trickle in. Most wore new clothes and unsoiled sneakers. The girls smelled of hair spritz, they waved their hands as they spoke, acrylic nails accenting their speech. The boys walked with the wide shuffle required to keep their sagging pants up. Everyone was upright, aware of the mass appraisal. These kids had come from phased out schools and had been bused from all over the city. Everyone would be eager to make a name for themselves. Tracy understood the importance of this too. She needed to assert her dominance immediately; her reputation had to be solidified at once.

The bolder kids relished the charged atmosphere. Alpha males and females could be spotted in the saunter of their struts, their shouts of “ay yos” and “hey girls” were trumpets announcing their arrival. Profanity rang out amidst the cloud of chatter, kids who traveled solo walked a bit quicker. Their eyes took in everything around them; this was a new jungle to navigate.

She said good morning to those individual kids as they passed. It had been her experience that these kids were the most dangerous. Already outcasts—and trying not to be fucked with—they had short fuses and could be quick to cut someone or throw a chair at a teacher. She was mindful to address larger groups too. Her years as a city student and stint subbing had taught her that the more sociable kids were actually more vulnerable and secretly longed for their teachers’ approval. A smile and an acknowledgement went a long way with them. Still, most didn’t respond to her greeting and

she didn't expect them to. Not yet anyway. She was just tilling the soil at the moment.

Thirty-one kids stared at her after the bell went off. She swallowed and plunged forward. "My name is Miss Mitchell. I will only answer to Miss Mitchell. You may not call me Miss or Mitch or anything else that isn't my name. I will address you by your name; you will treat me with the same respect. I might as well tell you now that I want you to learn. I will not give you busy work and I will not insult your intelligence with fill in the blank nonsense. I will push you, but I will do everything I can to help you. If you are not here to learn, then you need to see yourself to the door. You will not complain about having to do work, you will remain in your seats, and you will raise your hand to speak. Again, if that's a problem, there's the door."

She heard snickers and a couple of girls smacked their teeth. But when she raised an eyebrow, and looked directly at them, they lowered their eyes. No one moved and no one spoke. She touched the screen of the smart board. An hourglass appeared and a digital voice sang out, "Five minutes."

"We start everyday with the warm-up. The warm-up is designed to shift your thinking to the topic of the day's lesson. It is a very simple question that allows me to see what you already know or what you remember from the previous class. You do not have to copy down the question, but you need to restate the question in your answer."

Nothing and everything stood out from that first day. She said every word carefully and watched for the reactions they solicited. Some kids were bored, they had heard it all before. Others were defiant, eager for a chance to test her. But still some were interested, relieved to be in the hands of a capable teacher.

Her first weeks passed by quickly. She led the class tightly, every minute was planned. She rarely sat down. She led them through grammar exercises, telling them that standard English was the difference between minimum wage and management. She nudged sleeping students as she passed, kicked their desks if they didn't sit up fast enough. Students came to the smart board to place

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

semi colons and dashes. They hesitated when asked to read aloud, and wrote slowly. She complimented and corrected. She arrived early and left late. She went home and spread the day's events out in her mind. She went to class and listened to her cohort as they exchanged stories about lazy, disrespectful kids. She went back to work and tried all over again.

# 3

*“I like the way you be with all that personality,  
but I got flava too, you need to get with me”*

*-MC Lyte*

*“I Wanna Be Down (Remix)”*

ON ELECTION DAY SHE was a nervous wreck. She snapped at Tyrell, a sweet kid whose ADHD kept him in perpetual motion. “Ty, we don’t have time for this today.” She hurriedly scribbled out a pass to the bathroom and laid it on his desk. “Go take a walk.” She left work right after dismissal. At home she stripped and plopped down in front of CNN. Obama truly had the world on his shoulders. Yet it appeared that he remained everything that a Black man should be—resolute. How could anyone not love him?

At eight, she joined a bunch of black professionals at Crush to watch the results. Crush was the buppie social hub. During the week there were poetry readings, live bands, and comedy. On the weekends, the deejay was great and the crowd liked to dance. On election night it was packed. Brothers wore button downs and too

tight jeans and hard bottom shoes. Sisters wore blazers and scarves and Louis handbags. Tracy supposed it was the uniform of educated Black folk. She stuck out in a tailored leather jacket, peasant shirt, pale blue tights, and thigh high snakeskin boots. A few women looked at her and turned away; a couple of Alphas hugged her and promptly went back to their conversations.

She ordered wine and milled around by the bar. She heard snatches of conversations. "The problem with the city schools is these teachers don't relate. Who cares about Shakespeare when your mother's a crackhead?" Tracy turned in the direction of a nasally voice. It belonged to a petite woman that she knew to be a chemical engineer from Greenwich, Connecticut. Like she knew what the fuck she was talking about. A trio of men to the right of her were debating which luxury car was a better value. A couple behind them were not so quietly cheering every time Romney won a state.

She moved to the other side of the room where there was an empty seat across from a chestnut colored man. They locked eyes. She approached him. "Is anybody sitting here?" He shook his head no. Guess he was too fine to speak. Tracy knew that type. She pulled the chair back a few inches away before sitting down.

They didn't speak to each other for another hour. Romney was on top and Tracy had switched from wine to martinis. "I hope this motherfucker doesn't win."

The man spoke for the first time. "He won't."

When Ohio went Blue and Obama was declared the winner, she couldn't help but jump up and hug him. This moment had to be sealed with human contact. And when his arms closed around her, enveloping her in his scent, she wanted to hang on. She managed to pull away after a few moments. She stared at him and he held her gaze. She stepped back and bumped into one of the Alphas who pulled her towards the bar. "Trace, we gotta do a shot." His grip on her arm was strong, his joviality forced. She freed her arm and turned back towards the man, but he was gone.

A couple of weeks passed before the first snow fell. It was a feathery snow that fell to the earth like dandelion fluff and melted instantly. After dismissal, Tracy sat at her desk and watched it. She

sighed and went over a mental to do list. She had made the copies, called Ryan's mentor, sent a condolence card to Soror Molly. She still needed an oil change. She turned back to the snow and sighed again. There was no one to buy a scarf for, to cuddle up next to, to even send a happy first snow text.

She turned from her musings, packed up, and headed to the gym. Her love life had been reduced to occasional romps with Jason and the flirtations she shared with men at the gym. These men worked or worked out there and smiled at her and looked too long when she pranced by in yoga pants and sports bras. They made her fantasize about long days in bed, hand holding, and movie dates. But she turned down all real advances. They were either too corny, too old, married, or too thugged out. Plus, she couldn't afford awkward run-ins at a place she frequented so often.

She had a good workout and headed to the mats for her cool down routine. Pushing her body beyond comfort, she breathed deeply and leaned into her stretches. She noticed the man from election night when she stood up. Today, he looked even more handsome bench pressing. He didn't grunt or strain when he lifted, just focused on smoothly maneuvering the weight. Something about that focus held her attention. He sat up and noticed her.

Busted, she smiled and walked over to him, "Are you finished?"  
"You about to bench?"

"No, but I need someone to walk me to my car. I parked in the garage."

"We'll walk with you." His friend answered. Tracy hadn't noticed him before. His lined face and bulky build suggested a prison background. Tracy did not like the intrusion, but couldn't think of a way to get out of it. The trio fell into an uncomfortable silence.

"This is it," she said relieved once they stopped in front of her coupe. "Thanks." She didn't hesitate further to get inside and drive off.

She spotted him again a few weeks later. He nodded in response to her smile. She tried to shake away the familiar stirring the nod caused inside of her. She was just about to start her abdom-

inal routine, but couldn't stop herself from getting up and walking over to him.

She asked, "Did you already do abs?"

"Yeah, but I'll do 'em again." She showed him the sequence and he joined in. Though he struggled at times, he didn't seem embarrassed by it. "That's some workout", he said after they finished the last set. "You leaving now?"

"Yeah."

"Need somebody to walk you to your car again?"

This time they both smiled. It was only five o'clock and she was parked right in front of the building, but she didn't decline the invitation. The silence was comfortable as they walked through the gym's doors. She snuck peaks at him. He had defined cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. His frame was solid and basketball sleek. She remembered the way his arms felt around her.

He nodded when she pointed to her car right in front of the building. "Can I call you sometime?"

"Who are you going to ask for?"

"I was getting to that. What's your name?"

"Tracy. Yours?"

"X."

"Like the rapper?"

"No. My name is Oxford, but everyone calls me X."

"So your brothers are Cambridge and Canterbury?"

"That's clever. I'm the only Brit. My brothers names are Princeton and Harvard."

*That's clever.* He said that with authority. He moved with authority too. She rattled off her number and he put it in his phone. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-four." She didn't add that she was turning twenty-five in a couple of months. No need to think about that. "You?"

"Twenty-nine."

He called a few days later. At the sound of his rich baritone she found herself agreeing to go out to dinner with him. She hadn't been this excited about a date since, since ever. Something about X struck something within her. She felt like she already knew him.

*Always Want More*

The last time she had clicked so quickly with someone had been Tragic. She thought about waking up in that hotel room and shuddered. Nothing like that would ever happen again. She would meet X at the restaurant. She would lead the conversation and she would signal the completion of the date. She was in control.

Even after this declaration though, Tracy was still nervous. She stood in front of a full length mirror and ran her hands over the tight, gray, sweater dress she had chosen for the occasion. The dress was seductively casual and clung in the right areas that she was so determined to keep in line. Regular exercise kept her waist narrow, her thighs thick, and her ass tight. Her jet black, kinky hair was pulled back in a tight bun that made her eyes look even more slanted. She finished the look by dusting powder over her coffee colored skin and rubbing gloss over her full lips.

She was purposely fifteen minutes early when she pulled up to the Italian Steakhouse. She had a pre-date ritual. She liked to take a moment to hope for the best, picture herself smiling and nodding demurely, plot the witty things she would say. Her ritual was shot when X pulled alongside her. So went being early.

She slid out of the car and walked over to his cherry red Lincoln MKS. He responded to the question in her eyes. "What? I'm never late."

He slid his arm around her waist before leading her to the restaurant and away from the warnings that sounded in her mind. Inside, he pulled out her chair and let his eyes linger on her face once he sat down. "I'm glad we're finally here," he said after they ordered.

"Finally?"

"Yeah, I've seen you a few times before election night."

"Really?"

"Yep. At the gym, you're always by yourself. I like a woman who can stand alone and I like those blue shorts you wear."

"Thank you." She sipped her water. "So let me ask you, what are we doing here?"

He leaned towards her. "You know what we're doing here." He let that statement hang before licking his lips and leaning back in his chair. "Do you want to see a magic trick?" She nodded, eager for a distraction. "Okay, see this salt shaker?" He lifted it up as if she couldn't see it from where it sat at the table. "I'm going to make this ordinary run-of-the mill salt shaker disappear." He covered the salt shaker with the napkin and slammed his hand down on the table. The napkin flattened with no salt shaker underneath it.

She laughed and clapped. "How did you do that?"

"I can't tell you all of my secrets."

They chatted about nothing in particular: sports, music, movies. She laughed often and felt completely at ease. He smiled a lot, listening more than he talked. Afterwards, X walked her to her car and opened the door for her, leaning in close enough for her to catch another whiff of his scent. "Good night."

Her voice caught and she cleared her throat. "Good night."

It wasn't until she was lying in her bed that she remembered that they hadn't discussed the first date essentials. She didn't know if he had a girlfriend, a felony, or kids.

She still didn't ask those questions when he called and asked her to go to a basketball game a few days later. Shivers went down her spine when he put his hands on her hips, and directed her through the crowd towards their seats. "So you got a man?" he asked during a time out. He looked over and waited for her response.

"No. Do you have a girl?"

"No."

"Why is that?" It was her turn to peer in his face and search for red flags.

"No particular reason."

"You're a man of few words."

"I use enough."

"Do you? I still don't know anything about you."

"What do you want to know?"

"How do you make your money?"

"The hard way."

She raised an eyebrow. “And how exactly is that?”

He shrugged. “Does that matter?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Why? I’ll just say this: I make enough to live in a way that is suitable for right now. I make enough to take care of you if it came to that.” He waited for her response. She turned her attention to the game instead. The other team won. X took the outcome well. He shook his head and turned his attention back to her. Tracy on the other hand sulked. The Razorsharks should have won. They were better. Why hadn’t they played like it? He was quiet while she whined, then grabbed her by the shoulders. “You can’t be so affected every time something that you don’t want happens.”

Tracy brushed away his hands. “I don’t need you to school me, remember that.”

At dinner, she didn’t eat or talk much. Instead, she watched his lips move, followed the curve of his smile as he talked. He was smug, cocky as shit.

“You like hip-hop?”

She almost laughed. What an understatement. She used to eat, breathe, shit hip-hop. But she didn’t want to go into all of that, didn’t want to discuss heartbreak. “Yeah.”

“You heard that Kendrick Lamar? Yo, I haven’t heard someone switch the game up so much since Kanye came on the scene.” She smiled, remembered the first time she heard *College Dropout*. She was a sophomore at UPenn and played the album non-stop. She had never heard someone rap about college and racism and family obligations and the perils of consumerism before. She had never heard someone tell her story before. Of course the Kanye that she interviewed years later was way different than the one she initially fell in love with. But the brilliance and the passion was the same. And Kendrick Lamar, his album was mind blowing. Cinematic and gritty, he was a poet, a wordsmith. He told tales that captured the very essence of all that they were. His music stimulated her mind, gripped her heart, made her weep. Why did Black people have to have it this hard? She would kill to be able to write like that. A few years ago she would have died for a chance to interview him.

*Banke Awopetu McCullough*

“Yeah, he’s an artist. I so respect that.”

“And I so respect you. You’re not from around here.”

She tilted her head towards him. “Born and raised right here.”

He lowered his voice. “You don’t have to prove that to me. But I bet you haven’t been living here for the last few years.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I can tell. All of this hasn’t touched you yet.” No one had ever spoken truer words about her. Her parents had done the right thing and got her out of the city before its stench had seeped into her pores, before its claws had marred her spirit. Now being back home, she felt like an alien. Who were these people who didn’t dream and didn’t care about their own lives?

She looked away. He was cocky, but the way he carried it was subtle, refined even. He didn’t talk much, rarely said anything about himself. She looked back at him and saw wisdom and pain in his face. What secrets lay behind those eyes? She wanted to hear them all. She wanted to allow this man to unburden himself, to touch the innocence she knew was deep inside. How is it that he, too, had managed to remain unscathed by the city?

She was bugging. It was obvious what he was into and that was obviously wrong. She was glad when he finished his food. Glad when he dropped her off to her car.