

CELINE AENLLE-ROCHA

*White Black People*

It was almost ten years to the day since Aunt May went up north. In those ten years we'd had ten letters, most of them during the late seventies: the year Papa died, and she didn't return my mother's call, and she didn't fly home for the funeral.

And now, I was on the phone in a blue booth on the corner of 33rd Street and 8th Avenue on a drip-day, June 1987, and she was answering, and she was speaking to me.

The last time I saw her, body to body, my Aunt May said, "If you want something, you'd better go get it before some man takes it from you." She told me this while we were sitting in my mother's front room in the summer, mosquitoes singing through the open window. Walls white, cracked. I was eight years old.

"What man are you talking about, Aunt May?" I asked. I thought she meant her husband, who would take her paycheck and spend it on other women while she was at work. I knew about this because I heard my parents talking about it in the kitchen after I went to bed, my mother's voice pinched.

Her real name was Mary, but I called her Aunt May because it was easier to say, and because she had a cousin named Mary who was around the same age and, though she lived up in Oakland, Aunt May hated to be confused with her. "I'm a *person*, not just a *Mary*," she'd say.

Besides, the name Mary made me think of my catechism classes, and I couldn't picture my aunt, my best friend, as a woman trapped by motherly duty.

"Child, never you mind. I'm just talking in general," she said with a flip of her hand. So I decided it must be Papa Alphonse, my grandfather, the meanest man I knew.

Two weeks later she left. Without telling her husband. Without telling her father neither, or even my mother.

We heard a family friend had seen her in Chicago with a

wealthy white man a year later, and then, never again.

Four years after she left Opelousas, after she'd left Chicago too, she rang my mother's house. I was the one closest to the phone, the old plastic yellow one that clung to the wall in the kitchen.

My mother taught me to answer the phone when I was very young, in just the right way so I wouldn't "embarrass her." So, instead: "This is the Guillory home, Angela May speaking. How may I help you?" My mother would be pleased and I was the one embarrassed, but more than that, I was afraid of my mother. I dreaded the angry looks across the room, the silences, sometimes spilling into weeks, during which I ceased to exist except as an unworthy child. She was so frightening she'd even trumped my father in every household respect, even in my name — convincing him to let her keep her last name and even give it to me, because his parents were dead, and he had a nephew in Denver to carry on the Washington name.

"Oh — Angela —"

I knew the softness of her voice, the high pitch. "Hello," I said, my heart pounding. I felt a thrill spring up in my chest.

"It's your Aunt May —"

"I know."

"How're you doing, child?"

"Fine." I was suddenly angry with her. She had never asked to speak to me when her calls did come. She didn't know who I was. She didn't know that I'd read a hundred books since she'd left, or that I could braid my own hair now as tightly as she'd done.

"Angie?" I could hear my mother call to me from upstairs. We only had one phone, of course. "Who is it?"

She was so loud that I knew Aunt May could hear her. "Angie, wait, while I have you, let me just say —" she said.

"It's Aunt May," I called back to my mother.

"What?" my mother said, rushing down the stairs. She snatched the phone from me. "May? Where are you?" she demanded, and after a pause, repeated, "Manhattan?" I backed away, ready to run from the house so that when Aunt May asked to speak to me again she'd know I didn't care what she had to say.

"Do you realize it's been a year since we've heard from you, that we've been thinking you're dead in the bottom of a lake? Oh, really? You can't keep using 'space' as an excuse," I heard my mother snap as I headed for the front door. "You really are some-

thing, letting Papa raise hell and high water looking for you. I'm ashamed to call you my sister."

Now, watching my sweat drip into the gutters beneath Penn Station, I didn't recognize my Aunt May. When I last saw her, she was a curvy woman who wore long flowing dresses, blue and orange with stripes. This lady was thin, wearing a pinstripe suit, shoulder pads rising to her ears, and her hair was relaxed, parted down the middle. It was tied up tight in a ponytail.

"Angie?"

It was her, but it wasn't. My father had told me this would happen—that she'd be different—but I thought no one could be as different between thirty and forty as I'd be between eight and eighteen. I thought I'd be the shooting-up seed, the girl-grown-woman.

This was the reason I hadn't called her sooner. Why I waited until I was cold-lost and frightened, put off by hurried New Yorkers with no time for a poor country girl who might rob them in plain daylight.

I reminded myself this beautiful, shoulder-padded woman was really just Aunt May, squinting in the sun. She was just paler than I remembered. I ran to her.

"Child," she said as she looked me up and down. "I can't believe you're here. Look at you! First year at New York University. I knew you'd go far."

Relief loosened up my tight limbs. It was just what I'd hoped for. "Thanks for picking me up," I said. "It's so nice to see you, so nice."

I could've asked a hot dog seller which way was downtown. I could've walked the thirty blocks myself. I called Aunt May because I needed someone to guide me, gentle in that way I'd had before she went away and my mother had to start watching me again. Aunt May had left me, but I thought maybe—she still loved me.

Aunt May shook her head. "Don't worry yourself." She pulled my suitcases towards the curb. She stepped into the street, raising her hand gracefully, and turned to look back at me. She was beautiful. Green eyes and a weave.

"Y'all grown up on me," she said. She was beaming at me like I was her favorite niece, which I was—back then. I grew up with some twenty-six cousins but I was always the best to her, the one

who reminded her of herself. Both of us light-skinned and long-legged, everyone always said I looked just like her. Except for her eyes. Mine were brown.

Aunt May put me in a cab even though I told her I couldn't pay—"Child, *please*"—and I gave the cabby the address of my dormitory on Tenth Street. The building was thin and brown, not what I was expecting. I remembered the brochure they'd sent me with my letter of admission, that there had been an image of the sleek gray of a metallic slab that took up an entire block overlooking Washington Square Park. I'd looked at it and looked and thought, you'd never see this within fifty miles of Opelousas.

"This is where you'll be living?" Aunt May asked, as if she was hoping that I'd say no, I'd gotten the address wrong, I'd wasted our time, but it's all right because life would suddenly be better than what I was looking at now, eighteen on a busy sidewalk with two badly-packed purple suitcases.

She helped me check in with the cheery blond resident advisor and carried my luggage upstairs, where I was confronted with a small room lined with brick walls. There were two beds. I was early, there for the summer workshops. I wouldn't have a roommate until September.

I took the bed by the window.

"Why don't you come over for dinner?" Aunt May said. "Sara would love to meet you."

Who is Sara? I wondered, eyes clouded, sitting on the stiff mattress that overlooked no park at all but instead a dirty window, through which I could see a vase filled with dead flowers and a sleeping cat beside it.

Momma wanted me to go to the University of New Orleans because she went there, or at least to Xavier, which was where Daddy and some of my cousins studied. But why would I want to do over my parents' education? Didn't they abandon it all and end up back in Opelousas anyhow?

I wanted to go to college in New York City because it seemed the furthest thing from Louisiana without having to leave the country. And because I wanted to learn how to be someone else, on a brightly lit stage.

I thought at least Daddy would be pleased when I told him,

protected in my bedroom by youth and lavender walls.

But—"Angie," he said. I realized his face was worried, not proud, and I began to panic. He didn't say anything else.

I pulled my legs to my chest. "I'm going to NYU. Where else can I be happy? And anyway, I've got a full scholarship, so you don't have to worry about how dirt poor we are."

He rolled his eyes. "Angela, really. You won't know a soul," he added. He sat down on the edge of my bed. I was sitting at my desk. It was covered in the glitter I was sprinkling onto my graduation cap.

"I'll know Aunt May," I said. I knew I'd have to forgive her, because I knew nothing of New York, and I was convinced I'd run into her. And she was the only family I'd have out there.

He stiffened, glanced at the door as if he thought my mother would be able to hear the name from her office twenty blocks away. "You don't even know who she is anymore. None of us do. And it would upset your mother."

"Aunt May will know who I am," I said. "And I don't care what Momma thinks. I want to go to New York more than anything. I want to be famous. If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere," I crooned in my Frank Sinatra impression, tongue in the back of my throat. Daddy smiled.

Opelousas was more boring than anything else, but it was still Louisiana. Four years after the country was pieced back together, badly done and overlapped, a jigsaw puzzle of forced reconciliation, left-over Confederates killed more than two hundred Negroes in a hot September.

It was a white man who was supposed to die. His name was Emerson Bentley. He was a schoolteacher and a newspaper editor, eighteen and too young to be schooling and writing, in my opinion. He exposed an attack on our kind by the Knights of the White Camellia (not the Knights you're thinking of, but a cheap, backwater imitation). Three white men came into his classroom and taught him a lesson.

We cleaned him up, saved him from himself. Bentley fled back to his native Ohio, and he left the rest of us to be killed off in his place. No good Negro deed goes unpunished.

Seventy years later, Aunt May was born into the hospital

across town, the only one that accepted colored women. My grandmother almost died because the rooms were overflowing, and the nurses forgot her.

"Daddy, why'd you and Momma decide to live here?" I asked him one day, when I was twelve and just starting to look for more in life. Why'd you let Momma make you move back here, is what I meant. "Why didn't we stay in New Orleans? Isn't it safer there?"

"Your mother wanted to be near your Papa," he said.

"Why?" I said. My grandfather, the one who criticized her every move, telling her the meat was too dry, that she was lazy, couldn't keep a job, couldn't raise her child right.

Daddy looked at me in surprise, as if I wasn't supposed to notice when people were bad, at my age, or notice that he refused to acknowledge Papa's behavior. "Well, I suppose she wanted to look after your Aunt May," he went on. "She was sick."

"Sick how?"

"She . . ." I watched him try to find a translation, a filter. He couldn't. My father was honest to the point of self-destruction. Except when it came to Papa, where he turned a blind eye to the abuse.

Or maybe he could tell I'd keep asking, getting in other people's business, refusing to know my place. "She had a breakdown," Daddy finished.

It was clear he thought this was a bad thing. Some years later, I would find out that Aunt May missed her college graduation because she couldn't leave her dorm room. She couldn't open the door and go out into adulthood. She couldn't lift her hand.

Now, she lived in a large one-bedroom apartment on the Upper West Side. When I called her from the crusted-over phone in my dorm common room to ask how to get there, she told me I could take the subway. But not to get home, she added. By then it would be dark. She would worry about me.

I hadn't brought anything with me that was half as fancy as Aunt May's suit, so I did my best with a polyester jumpsuit from my middle-school days. I was able to wear it only on the weekends, since I was covered in a Catholic school uniform during the week, and it was from the thrift store in the back of our church. It still fit, something that brought my mother shame. "You're too skinny," she'd sigh when she saw me wearing it. "I guess you didn't get your momma's ass."

Hands shaking, I walked through Washington Square Park

on my way to the Christopher Street I train station. As I reached the corner on West 4th Street and Washington Place, I heard a shriek, and I couldn't help but jump. Daddy had warned me the city was dangerous. My mother said, "It's full of hoodlums."

I turned to see two women laughing as one picked herself up from the sidewalk where she'd fallen. They were both wearing oversized denim jackets, and I couldn't figure how they weren't sweating in the June heat.

One of the women was Black, and I watched as she full-mouthed kissed the other woman, who was white. I stood, transfixed. Then a middle-aged man pushed past me—"Excuse me"—and when I looked back, the women were walking away.

I had never been with anyone white, let alone a woman. I wondered.

Aunt May let me in with another hug and let me look around. "My ex-husband bought it," she said proudly. "I got it in the divorce."

"Uncle Jimmy bought this place?" I said in awe.

She frowned at me. "No, of course not. Jimmy and I were divorced before I left Opelousas. Your mother didn't tell you? I married a man in Chicago. He worked in finance, I never figured out exactly what. We moved here when his company transferred him."

"Oh," I said. I knew there'd been some white man up north, but not that she'd married him. I wondered what their life had been like, why he wasn't still here to welcome me.

A woman came out of what I thought must be the bedroom—I could see the corner of a mirror atop a dresser. She was light-skinned, dark-haired, pink-lipped. "Oh, I'm so happy to meet you," she said, grabbing my hand.

"This is Sara. We live together," Aunt May said.

I thought of the two denim-hugged women in the street. What else had happened in ten years? I hadn't been privileged to know any of it.

We ate smoked fish for dinner, and Aunt May let me drink white wine on the terrace with her. Through the glass sliding door, I could see Sara fiddling with the television set.

"You probably want to know what I've been up to all this time," Aunt May said.

"Of course I do," I said. I felt butterflies in my stomach, ready

for the story.

"I needed to get away for a bit," she started. "Then I met Bill, and I couldn't go back. . ."

"Why not? Not even for a visit?" I said.

She turned to me, and she became red. "He didn't know anything about you all. He thought I was from a good family in Little Rock. He wasn't. . . he wasn't very, you know, worldly, not in that way. I thought I might as well not tell him."

I didn't say anything for a moment. I thought of those years missing her. And all that time, she was trying on new selves, not on a stage like I did but anywhere she wanted.

When the silence became too heavy, I said, "But why did you break up?"

"Well, he found out. Your mother got ahold of my phone number," Aunt May sighed. I remembered, with dread, that I had given my mother the phone, that she had probably had the service company trace the number.

Aunt May said, quickly, "Now, child, I don't blame you for this. But Delphine never forgave me for leaving her to take care of Papa, and she wanted to make me come back to Opelousas when he died. Bill answered the phone, she told him who she was, and. . ." she sighed again. "That was that. I came home, and he said, 'Your sister sounds like a Negro.'"

"I'm sorry," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"Oh, it's not so bad," she said. "I got to keep the flat, and then I met Sara, so I'm not so lonely. But it was a wonderful life with him, just lovely," she went on, wistfully. "He'd buy me these long silk dresses and take me to galas and banquets. I met the Vice President once. And to think, the man never knew he shook hands with a poor colored girl from the Deep South."

"And you're really not angry with Momma? I'd be," I said. I half-meant it but mostly wanted to hear what she'd say.

Her hands pressed against the railing. She stared down nineteen floors to Riverside Drive. "I was for a long time."

We were quiet for a few moments. Then she said, "Well, let's not talk about me anymore. So you're going to be an actress?"

"I hope so," I said.

"Your program is very competitive," she said. "You must be really talented to get in. You'll be a movie star—or maybe on Broadway!" She smiled. "I'll have a famous niece."

I couldn't help but smile, cry out, "I'm going to make you proud!"

I wanted to be an actress because I thought it was the easiest way to make people listen to me. As a child I would climb to the top of the lazy, feathered trees in the backyard and yell as loud as I could to see if my best friend Benny would respond from his own tree two blocks away.

One day, I got all the way to the top. "Angela Guillory, ringing Benjamin LeBlanc!"

"Hi, Angie!" I heard from across the floor of leaves. I thought the sky must be a ceiling.

"Let's float down the Mississippi River!" I called back. It would've been miles away, but we were always threatening to do it, build a Huckleberry raft and sail down to New Orleans, where we'd pretend to be grownups and taste bourbon or Cajun fish. What it really meant was that we would meet at the park and try to catch foul balls escaping the stadium.

"Enough of that racket!" I heard below the tree.

I remembered my mother saying this. I remembered this day in particular because she was wearing her black suit, and there was makeup on her face, the kind that made her look washed out. That meant she was going on an interview.

"Momma, why can't you get a job and leave me here to hang upside down from this tree till I nearly kill myself?" I said, grinning at her. I was ten years old.

She looked near to slapping me. "When I do, y'all will have a sitter then, and she won't let you get away with this like your daddy does," she muttered as she walked back towards the house. "Angela May Guillory, if I hear one more peep out of that tree!"

I ran to Benny's house, telling myself it wasn't because of Momma but because I was bored out of my mind.

"Hey Angie," he said, whistling like his father, Big Ben, who was my hero. The kind of man I thought my father should be. Stood his ground, talked his own mind and not his wife's. He listened to me the way Aunt May had done before she'd left.

Benny threw me his extra mitt. Mine had finally fallen apart, the leather worn down and peeled off, tatters dripping through the house until my mother yelled at me to "throw that disgusting thing

away and sweep up its ungodly remains.” When Daddy bought it for me at Goodwill, it was already beaten up but it was blue, my favorite color, and a Rawlings. And it fit me just right. I liked to think about where it had been, whether some rich white kid had worn it before me. I hoped it wasn’t somebody I knew from school. “Maybe it’s vintage,” Daddy said when I brought this up from the backseat. He looked confused and sympathetic and embarrassed all at once.

But that glove was gone now. It had only lasted two years. I told Benny I outgrew it. Which wasn’t a lie.

I slid the extra mitt on. “Thanks.” It felt warm and smelled like a boy. “You dip this in your sweat or somethin’?” I said.

“Why don’t you just be happy I let you borrow my stuff at all,” he said, and we walked off towards the field, where we waited for foul balls to come singing over the chicken wire, like they were desperate to be with us, like they didn’t want to be home runs anyway.

When we had to turn in family trees at school in the fifth grade I took up two feet of my father’s parchment paper drawing leaves and branches from me all the way up to my mother’s great-great-great-grandmother Margarita Guillory, whose name she’d drawn in black in my tree’s topmost bush.

“What are you doing?” I said when I saw my mother bend over my work with a pen.

“You’re missing Margarita. The whole family line started with her.”

I saw the date 1770 next to her name. “How do you know who we’re related to that far back? Mr. Henrickson will want to know,” I complained.

“Well, I have the court records.” She went into her study and dug through her old papers until she found a photocopy of an old-timey piece of paper. The writing was small and confusing, and I gave up trying to read it.

“Court records from what?”

“She was a slave, you know,” my mother said. “She sued for her freedom. She’d had children, lots of them, and she wanted them to be free.” I found out later, when my mother thought me old enough, that the children had been made by Margarita’s owner.

On the bus to school the next day, Benny got a sneak peek of my family tree. “You really come from a slave? Mr. H will love that.” He looked impressed, for once. “I know Jeanne and Vincent tease you and all, but now you can tell them you just as Creole as the rest

of us.”

My cheeks turned rosy with pride.

It’s not that Jeanne and Vincent didn’t know I was colored—Creole. Everyone knew. Everyone knew everybody’s business. Knew my momma’s family had been slaves just round the corner on the old, overgrown plantation. Knew we’d stayed there picking and twisting cotton until just before I was born, when Papa acquired his own land from the dying man in the big house who had no heirs.

But Jeanne liked to press her finger to my cheek and giggle, telling me I was uppity, that I was high yellow because my mother had prayed real hard for me to be born snowed through. That I had good hair, even though it was almost the same color and texture as hers—my hair had always grown in tight ripples, but when I reached puberty it ballooned out from my face, frizzing into a dark cloud with the heat.

“You’re mixed,” she said.

“My parents are both Creole,” I reminded her. “Any mixing happened on the plantation.”

Jeanne knew as well as anyone that the white girls at school ignored me just the same as they did her, that she and I sat with Benny and Vincent because that’s who we belonged with. I would’ve picked Jeanne over those girls anyday. But Jeanne got followed by security officers in Macy’s, and I didn’t. Not if I was alone. She never forgave me for it.

Up north in the city wind, making love in the wrong skin color was its own problem. Two weeks into the semester I met and slept with Teddy, the Jamaican boy from Queens who broke up with me after the third time we were talking in a bar and a white boy came up to us, always one who looked fresh out of a fraternity, putting a hand on my shoulder and saying, “Is this guy bothering you?”

Teddy said, though, that the reason he grew tired of it wasn’t because of the polo shirts but because all I would respond was, “No, thanks though.”

“Maybe I got enough to worry about with men crowding me all the time,” I told him.

Men in bars, on the street, in a coffee shop, they tended to smile at me. I knew I wasn’t as pretty as Aunt May, but I was small and looked my age, and I couldn’t shake my country look, even after

finding myself an oversized denim jacket at Contempo Casuals a week after I saw the two women on the street.

Women seemed not to notice me at all.

After Teddy and I ended, for a week straight I tapped my fingers nervously on my desk. Our professors told us to call them by their first names and were anxious that we not worry about auditions yet, we were still crafting ourselves, but when my mother wrote to me she always said, *I'm sure you'll make the most of this experience. I'm sure you won't regret going so far away.*

Finally, I received a phone call telling me I would not be playing the sweet-girl-next-door part at the theater downtown, thank you. But they sort of liked me, and if I was interested there was another audition tomorrow for a different, smaller show.

I walked into the building on 28th Street to find myself at the end of a narrow hallway, brightly lit, lined with chairs. I had pictured myself sitting awkwardly between two other girls who looked just like me, but there was no one there. Afraid someone might catch me eavesdropping, I pressed my ear to the door and heard familiar lines. My lines.

The door was made of glass, but opaque, and I could see my curls were getting a little long. I thought about piling them on top of my head like Whitney Houston, but I didn't have any pins. I'd forgotten my scrunchie too. I sat down, trying not to wrinkle my pressed white shirt. It was silk, a present from Aunt May. The meatball sub I'd had for lunch swam angrily in my stomach.

I was whispering the lines to myself when another girl came in, long brown hair parted down the middle like a beauty queen. She was tanned, pretty, prettier than me. She did the same thing I did, looking around to make sure she was in the right place, then sat down next to me with a sigh.

"I knew they'd give me one of the later slots. Lucky me."

"Oh, you like to go first?" I flubbed. I never knew what to say to strangers.

She smiled. "It's my superstition, I guess." She was wearing a yellow frilly dress, the type of thing it would never occur to me might work for an audition.

"You're reading for Sofia, right?" I said.

"Yeah. I know, I know, the part is written Puerto Rican, but thought I might as well give it a shot. I'm out of work," she said.

"Sofia's Puerto Rican?" I said. "It just said, 'Girl, brown-

haired, brown-eyed, twenty years old' on the casting call."

"It's somewhere else in the script. Well, don't worry," she said. "They won't ask you or anything. You look sort of ethnic. Are you Italian or something? No? Jewish?" I shook my head.

"I know this girl at school," I said. "She's Argentinian, but she's so blond that people think she must be Swedish."

The girl laughed. I realized, much later than I should have, that she thought I must be white after all. I didn't correct her. Every time I did let someone know, they hushed their minds.

The audition went so badly that I ended up at Aunt May's place that night, feeling sick, afraid to face my roommate, who had just won Portia in *The Merchant of Venice*. I rang the doorbell and Sara answered.

"Angie! How did it—"

"I bombed it," I said, setting down my heavy bookbag. My stomach was churning. "But anyway, apparently the part is for a Puerto Rican girl. So I shouldn't have taken it anyway, right?"

She shrugged. "I say take the work you can get."

I felt a sticky sweetness in my stomach, and then my throat was made raw.

"You better be done pining after that boy," Aunt May told me a week later, when I met her at the Brooklyn Museum to see the new Hiroshige exhibit, because she said I could do with a bit more cultur-ing, still.

"Yes ma'am," I said, smiling. I was. Boys didn't seem to interest me much anymore, not compared to acting.

"He didn't understand you," Aunt May said. "A boy like that doesn't deserve you. You're pretty, you're going to be a famous actress. . ." she went on with the lies, saying she was proud of me: "You have far exceeded your parents. And mine."

I loved her for her consolation speech, but there was a furnace on my neck, burning up my ears, when she talked about my mother.

When I stepped out of the shower that night I noticed mascara smeared across my towel, black waves against the white terry. I asked my roommate about it, and she scrunched up her face, turned around. I watched her blond hair bounce out of the room.

I curled up on my bed, wondering who would be more disappointed in me, Aunt May, my mother, or all the white girls

in the world, by the end of this lifetime, this slip of history in New York City.

My mother was relieved when I called, not yet having caved and asked her sister if I was still alive. She flew me home for the fall break. I didn't tell my roommate, hoping that if she thought I was just shut in, sticky in my depression, she wouldn't get away with eating my cereal, using my towels.

I stepped off a plane into the Louisiana water-air. Daddy picked me up at the airport in Lafayette. While eating dinner with my mother, he asked about my auditions.

"They're okay," I said. "I haven't booked anything, but. . . I have a callback next week."

"What was the point of going to Tisch if you're not on a stage every night?" my mother asked.

"It would have to be a Broadway show or something like it for me to perform eight nights a week," I said. I looked down at my peas. "Not like you'd come to any shows anyway, Momma."

She laughed that not-smiling laugh. "Like I can fly out every few months for a two-night modern-avant-garde-or-whatever at some theater with 'Box' in its name."

She was hard-faced, tough-love disappointed. Facing my mother, I wondered what life would have been like with a different one.

"I'll let you know when I book something good," I said, trying to break the tension. "House seats on Broadway."

Daddy smiled, said, "You know we're proud of y'all." He cleared his throat, then the dishes.

I waited until he was in the kitchen. "Momma, I don't know how to please you. Doing well or not, nothing's good enough."

She sighed. "Come on, Angie, I'm just playing. But you know, you move to New York and start hanging out with that ghost aunt of yours, and now you actin' all white and bothered, like you better than your own momma. Let me guess—you date white boys now?"

"No, I don't," I said. I paused. "I don't date boys much at all."

She looked at me for a moment. I knew she'd known as long as I had, but that she never bothered to ask me about it. "Mhmm," she went on. "You wear nice shoes, you go to Jazzercise classes."

"It's not like I can pay for those myself," I said defensively. "It's the same life I'd have here. I just don't have to live with my parents no more." I wrapped my arms tightly around my middle. "So what

if Aunt May buys me things sometimes? At least she wants me to have a better life.”

Momma rocked back in her chair, crossed her arms. Her eyebrows met together. “We’d’ve all done the same if we had a dream that long distance. It’s just funny, that’s all. That little girl in your class always used to call you whitegirl, and you used to get so mad,” she said. “It’s just ironic, that’s all. You faded some when you left.”

I shook my head. For the rest of the weekend, I kept to my room.

In Manhattan the next week, Aunt May was short with me. “Your mother won’t do anything but bring you down,” she chided me.

“I know, you were right. I don’t know why I was feeling guilty,” I told her. “I don’t belong there anymore.”

She nodded like she knew all. “You got that audition tomorrow?”

“This afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll go with you.”

She marveled at the studio even though the paint was peeling and it smelled like eggs. It was like she thought I could feed off the stale talent of the dead actors who had walked there before me. She began to get antsy while we waited, watching prettier girls go in and out the audition doors. When the director came out to use the restroom I saw that his eyes didn’t register on any of us. Aunt May could see it too, and when he made his way back to the room she suddenly bolted up, telling him I was “wholesome,” which is what Susie June, the girl I’d be playing, certainly was. From down south. From Louisiana.

People were beginning to stare and for the first time, I realized I was embarrassed, fully, of my aunt. I found myself hoping he wouldn’t know she was with me. But how could he not? We were the only two alike.

“She can do accents like nobody’s business. Especially, you, you know—certain *kind* you hear down there,” Aunt May whispered to him. She had a different voice when she talked to white folks. Like she was suddenly made of refined edges. Like she didn’t have that kind of accent.

“That won’t be necessary. Susie June is a Southern Belle,” he said, uncomfortably closing the door. I felt hot again. All this for another girl who was nothing like me.

I thought surely my aunt had cost me the audition, but within minutes I heard, “We’re ready for you, Miss Guillory.” I found that, expecting less, now, I did the job perfectly. I let my natural voice out, let my vowels hang low. I turned code over so well I forgot which was my first language. The next day, I got the call. The sickening butterflies were back there in my stomach, sticking to my insides, and I left another audition for Aunt May’s five blocks away, not knowing if she was there but too afraid to call. She was home.

“Where’s Sara?” I asked, looking for a buffer.

“She went to the gym.” Aunt May was at the kitchen counter, chopping garlic on a pink and blue color-blocked cutting board.

“Oh. Okay. I got the part,” I said. I saw her face opening up in pleasure. “I said I’d take it. But I don’t know, I’m thinking about calling them back.”

“Why would you do that?” she cried out, and closed her mouth suddenly. She breathed deeply. “Angela. Why?”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s *for* me.” I wanted to keep it at that, but I could tell she was angry now. “Why is this a problem? You’re not the one who has to pay my tuition.”

“Don’t you remember what I used to tell you? If you want something, don’t let nobody take it away from you. That includes yourself.” Aunt May shook her head, turned away from me. I could smell the garlic she was chopping. I wondered why she didn’t have a garlic press. She was the kind of person who’d have a garlic press.

“It didn’t feel right,” I said. I felt corny for saying it. “At all these auditions I see white girls coming in with hoop earrings and tans, putting on Spanish accents to get roles. Latina girls come in and they get turned away. They’re told they don’t look right. And they put white girls on those shows instead.”

“So?” she said, impatiently. “Are you really telling me you feel guilty for taking a part away from a white girl? Another white girl who looks like the last white girl and the one before that? The ones taking brown girl parts anyway?”

“I’d be as bad as them—”

“How?”

My skin prickled. “If I start playing white girls on a stage . . . I might become one.”

She laughed. “That’s a stupid thing to say, Angela. And you’re not stupid.”

I knew she didn’t mean that, but I shut up anyway. For a

minute. I walked to the front door, put my boots on. Then I got mad. I went back into the kitchen.

She was still chopping garlic, like nothing had happened. She turned and looked at me in my knee-high rain boots, covered in Central Park mud. "Now I *know* y'all not walking into my kitchen with that mess—"

"Why'd you leave, Aunt May?" I said.

She flinched, glanced my way for a moment but didn't meet my eye. She looked like a child who's been called their full name by a parent. Like she knew a lecture was coming. I felt regret rush up my throat, but I knew I said it for a reason.

"Why'd you leave Opelousas?" I said again.

"I decided to go somewhere where your uncle *wasn't*," she said. "Simple as that."

"How can it be that simple, when you went so far, when you stopped calling Momma and you—" I fumbled. "You didn't ever call me neither." I was slipping back into Opelousas.

"You've never been married. How would you know? Jimmy only married me so his children would be lighter than him. Once we found out I couldn't have any he went right back to dark women. He thought they were less stuck-up."

"So what did coming here get done? Prove him right?"

"Child—" she said, matching my voice. "Listen to me good. I took my own advice, for once. I went and got myself a better life. I got a woman who treats me well. I got a good job. I *thought* I got rid of this accent . . ." She paused. "If that means proving my dog of a husband and your banshee of a mother right, then sure, baby, I did just that."

I shook my head. "Don't call her that. My momma just cared about you, that's all—"

Aunt May laughed. "Oh, please. She was just jealous I did what she was too afraid to do." She looked away, back at the cutting board. "Your mother would never admit it, but her biggest dream would've been to move here and live like one of these white ladies with pomeranians and Jamaican babysitters." She still didn't look me in the eye. "Why be Creole in Opelousas when you can be whatever you want in New York City?"

"You're the one that left, though. You're the one who left me." I left her there in the kitchen, my wet boots squeaking, and went back out into the rain.

Walking down Riverside Drive, hardly thinking to watch my back in the darkness, I wondered why I hadn't seen it before. For a moment, I hated her. Why did she blame this all on my mother? Why didn't she understand that I could already feel the bleaching, this turning paler each day in the New York City darkness? She hadn't even noticed her own whitening.

It still felt superior to my white friends from college, the ones who looked almost translucent, out of place, on Rockaway Beach. They burned up before my eyes, discomfort plain on their pinched cheeks. I could feel their desire to hide underneath rainbow umbrellas. But maybe it was there now, on the inside. For me.

At Tisch I felt myself bristle in the classroom as I looked around at each new white face, feeling smaller and smaller as I assumed their lack of color. When, finally, a Black student would come in, that shrinking on her face too, I'd want to look her in the eye and cry, "Don't feel alone! How can you not see me? I'm not one of *them*."

Like the white people in the room, looking at her with sympathy, would think, "Don't worry. I am one of the good ones," my mind screamed, "I am like you, I am like you."

And just like a white person, I was wrong. I was fading.