

“Prepare to be challenged, and changed.”

—TAYARI JONES, *New York Times* bestselling author of *An American Marriage*

POMEGRANATE

A NOVEL



HELEN ELAINE LEE

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POMEGRANATE

A NOVEL

Helen Elaine Lee

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For Jordan

*For my part, I prefer my heart to be broken.
It is so lovely, dawn-kaleidoscopic within the crack.*

FROM "POMEGRANATE" BY D. H. LAWRENCE



Mama was gone and not gone.

She had disappeared into the hospital while Ranita was at school, getting tamed and stuffed with facts and equations, and there she lay, immobilized by tubes and wires. Ranita had stood beside her hospital bed, watching the blue ventilator bag fill and empty, trying to understand how Geneva Atwater had been felled by something as tiny as a blood clot.

She had seen her dying.

And after the mourners filed past Ranita at the wake, grateful for the phrase that helped them navigate the sudden woe, *sorry, so sorry, so sorry for your loss*, she had stood beside the coffin and stared at her mother, lying in its white satin folds like a parody of a fancy gift box display. The shiny wig Daddy knew she would have wanted, low on her forehead like a helmet. Skin waxy and mouth pressed shut. Eyes closed to her, for good now.

She had seen her dead.

But she heard her mother's voice in the back door alcove, at the table, in the basement. And now she would never please her. Never tell her what she was keeping inside. Never love her more than she feared her.

A month after the funeral, she sat across from Auntie Jessie, picking at one of the casseroles the church ladies kept bringing. She'd brought a book to the table, which had never been allowed, but there were fewer *shalts* and *shalt nots*, now that Jessie had joined Daddy at the house until things eased up. He stretched out work as long as possible and escaped to go fishing on the weekends, and both he and Jessie tried to stave off the bloated gloom with food, encyclopedia facts, artificial cheer. Neither one talked about Geneva. Neither one asked Ranita about her sadness. That was the family way, and what hurt kept haunting like a hungry ghost.

She heard the front door open and close, and there was Daddy in the archway, smiling like a moonlighting jester. Chuckling from his belly like he was launching

a magic trick, he pulled a dented orb from a brown paper bag, and Ranita told herself to smile.

She'd seen photos and drawings of pomegranates, but not a real one. "Where'd you get that?" she asked, more edgy than she intended, and his smile wobbled.

"Your birthday getting lost in the shuffle and whatnot, I thought...", he began. She looked away. "Eclipsed" was more like it.

He put the fruit in her hands. "There's no making up for what's past, but this here... it's got some surprising and wonderful news buried just inside."

Expecting a whole lot of nothing, her fingers studied the scratched and ordinary skin. He said they should wait to open it; sometimes waiting made things better.

"You hungry, Lennox?" Auntie Jessie asked, getting him a plate and listening as he told about the engine repairs and paint restorations that had filled his day. She kept him chattering while Ranita muted their voices in her head, turning the pomegranate to take in its flat and faded spots, pressing on the sharp crown at the top. And when she was about to get up and wait on something else, he said, "Let's open it."

Ranita peeled back the rind and pried the bloodshot gems from the spongy membrane that held the whole thing together. She was struck silent. Awed by the wild design of it, and by the little bursts of sour-sweet juice from the seeds that turned her fingers red.

There was a whole world, strange and crazy-beautiful, underneath the skin. Layer on crooked layer of ruby crystals. And chambers, like inside a heart.



ONE

February 2019

I live my life forward and backward.

Seems like my body remembers what I can't afford to forget.

I'll be carrying on, trying to choose right, and then the past comes for me, rumbling from my chest into my shoulders, pushing through my neck and up into my head. I try and answer its call, own where all I've been.

Remember, even when forgetting feels like the only mercy.

Four years of captivity, and here I sit on this hard plastic chair, surrounded by cinder block, about to leave Oak Hills. Waiting to be thrown back to the world. And I cannot get still. My knees jackhammer; my feet tap. They've got wills of their own. My interlocking fingers steeple and flatten and steeple.

I try and empty my mind, but my Oak Hills life thunders to the surface and flashes before me, like those shifting pieces of colored glass in the tin kaleidoscope I had when I was six. Damn, really? On my out day, which is stressful enough. I choose a pomegranate and try to see myself holding it, broken open, in my hands. Leathery skin. Pointy stalk. Jeweled seeds.

And I can just about feel the shape and weight of it again when I hear the shout, "Did I say you're free to go?" and I'm surprised to find myself standing up. I look the overseer in the eye... why give him a name when all I am is *inmate*?... and rein in my anger as I sit my ass back down.

It's true what they say about time slowing down the shorter you get. These last few days have inched by, me hoping and praying I've got it in me to keep doing

right. I wait to get back the belongings I came in with, wondering what my stuff will look like to me now. Clothes that no longer fit. Cheap pleather purse full of what? Lip gloss. Suspended license. Empty wallet. Two keys that no longer open anything.

Dear God... dear Power Greater Than Me (whoever... whatever you are)... let me prove I deserve to be a mother to Amara and Theo. Let me handle my business, work my program, stay on track. Keep away from temptation, avoid the people who can pull me down. In here, meetings give you the fellowship that gets you through, and a place to say... to remember... you're a human with a story that's got a next chapter. Even if the confessing *is* excruciating, I'll find a meeting and go every day if I have to.

Own being powerless and powerful.

Choose right.

Behind the walls, in this concrete desert, everything's regulated and decided for you. All the everyday stuff, the whats and the whens. Wake up and go to chow. Get your meds. Go outside and come back in. Take a shower. Go to sleep. Line up for this. Sit down and wait for that. And all those things that on the outside you do and pay no attention? Behind the walls they're the high points of your day. Makes me feel like that German shepherd of Jasper's. He named him King and kept him in a chain-link corridor. Nobody ever played with him or loved on him. He lived to eat.

Buff that floor. Scrape those plates. Sew labels into these T-shirts, one after another and then some more, and sew American flags for the folks who hate your kind to jab you with. Improve yourself with classes and groups.

All day long you're told what and when and how, and the cost of defiance, too. And you hear the echoes of ancestors, whispering that though the best chance of survival may be submission, that could also be the death of you. And love... affection... touch... the stuff that makes your heart keep beating? Contraband. Now who, I ask, can keep alive that way?

Nothing much grows in here unless you go hard against the script. To keep alive, you've got to choose what you can, small though it may seem. Imagine yourself past the razor wire. Notice those trees and birds way in the distance. Look at the sky and picture it whole. You've got to see yourself free from the demon

that rides you, believing something new, something clean, can happen, after all. Behind the walls, nothing's small. And choosing, it's something precious, and it means life just might have some mystery in store for you.

I choose you, Maxine once told me, and you're against the rules.

Yesterday, at the end of my little leaving party, I stood there as she left the dayroom before me. All of my well-wishers were there. Gwen and her latest boo. Avis, crocheting her endless blanket. Eldora and the family she builds and mothers in here. Even my new cellie Keisha came, though she still thinks she can do her time solo. We ate the makeshift treats and canteen snacks they all chipped in, and everyone said what they'd do if it was them getting out. And when it was over, I watched Maxine's proud, upright back fade away.

Tender-tough Maxine. Along with her free-world walk and the way she breaks down the politics of just about everything 24/7, her ink and her no-nonsense way and her legal know-how, there's a world of other stuff inside. She can talk up pomegranates and make me taste them. She can conjure grass or clouds or cornfields, tell Chesapeake riverbanks and make me feel the current and the muddy floor.

I wanted to run after her, call out to her, touch her. *I love that back*, that's what I was thinking. *Its moles and scars. Its tats. Its defiant pride, no matter what she's been through.* Like most of us in here, the only sleep she knows is broken.

Last night, I sat in my cell with the card everyone signed and the little in-spite-of gifts from the leaving party, so sweet and painful, and started counting down the last bit of time I owed.

I could feel Keisha's crying shake the bunk above me. Mostly we look away to give a little privacy. This time I stood and asked, "You alright?" Like usual, she didn't answer. I'd seen her with a letter earlier and figured it must have been the kind that tells you something bad, maybe the kind that says you've been foreclosed.

I made my voice as gentle as possible. "Word from home?"

She sat up, pulled the envelope from the covers, and ripped it up. Then she threw the pieces to the floor, oozing angry and bitter, and said, "Where the fuck is home?"

I didn't even know what to say to that. Maybe it's a good question for most of us in here, but I couldn't answer and I couldn't just go back to my bunk, so I stood there looking at the photos she'd stuck up on the wall with toothpaste. And I knew it was risky, but there's one sure way to get a woman to open up.

"That your baby girl?"

She nodded, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. "Tyeisha. She's almost three."

I was relieved. Pained, too, I'll admit it, when she said, "She's with my moms." Some folks have mothers beside them through their thick and thin. Then I asked about her girl. Keisha kept her answers short, but I saw a light in her eyes come on. "She knows her letters and numbers. Her favorite color's green."

She jumped down from the top bunk and walked across the torn pieces of her letter to get to the stingy window where she likes to stand, looking out at the sky. Something in me wanted to make her face reality, tell her even if she could find the drinking gourd up there, she wouldn't be following it to freedom. And part of me wanted to hug her to me like she's one of mine. *But I'm out of here tomorrow*, I reminded myself, getting my feelings in check as I turned away.

Trying to ignore her, I got ready to rise up and go, come morning. Took my hair out of the cornrows I've been wearing these last few years, thinking on how I tripped when I first got here. No relaxers. No extensions. Barely any hair products at all. Easiest thing to do is either learn to braid or figure out something you can trade to someone who knows how, turn in your weapons, and forget about cute. I sat on the edge of my bunk, picking out my braids with the end of my comb, and it felt good as I freed up my hair, though when it was all loose I couldn't help thinking how Mama would have shut her eyes to the sight of me either way, cornrows or my wild kinks, and did my best to smooth it back into an Afro puff.

I gathered up my worldly possessions, starting a pile on my bunk. Laid out my second-string beater sneakers, T-shirts, socks, two of the unsexiest bras you ever saw, and a week's worth of high-waisted gray cotton underwear you can't really call panties. Comb and hair grease. Wounded dictionary. I unfolded the loose-leaf paper Eldora pushed into my hand today and my eyes teared up as I looked at what she'd shared with me from last summer's garden plot, though she had so little to spare: pale discs from her bell peppers and zucchini seeds, smooth and eye shaped.

I'd already returned everything I'd borrowed from the donated library that made up the one cubic foot of reading and writing material allowed, and passed on my flip-top tuna and ramen noodles. Traded envelopes and paper for extra socks. Put aside my extra toilet paper for Keisha, along with the little bars of soap that made me itchy and ashy. Tossed my shower flip-flops. And that was it, what I had to show for my Oak Hills life. I was already wearing my good sneakers, my thermals, and the windbreaker that passes for a winter coat.

Looking at my list of Boston-area NA meetings before adding them to the pile, I tried not to be cynical about the names: Freedom Express... Clean and Proud... The Solution... South End Miracles. I read through the affirmations I'd put on index cards, remembering how embarrassed I was at first by their corniness, certain that Jasper was having a good laugh at them, at me, from the afterlife. The cards and letters and artwork from Amara and Theo. The program from Daddy's funeral service. And the kites Maxine's left for me over the last two and a half years. I keep that cache inside the Bible a missionary prison volunteer gave me. The little paper messages that gave me and Maxine another way of touching, and added some mystery and discovery to a world of regulations and taboos.

No sacred space in here except the ones we create, we made do and left them behind the dayroom microwave, where even if they were found, they could not be tied to us. Milagros. To be added to the free things list we make out loud, and the one I keep on my own.

Maxine got me plugged into recognizing and naming the things that cost nothing and don't depend on permission, the things available to everyone, present and past tense. Future, too, one hopes. The smell of new-cut grass. Skipping stones. A curl of white birch bark. Eyelash kisses. Reading. Looking. Walking, even if it's only round and round the Yard.

Next I added my notebook log of everything I did to keep in contact with my kids. Once I got my balance, I started putting it all down: every phone call; every card and letter; every visit Daddy, Auntie Jessie, and Auntie Val made here with them; every call to the caseworker, whether it got answered or not; every paper filed with DCF.

Then I pulled their photos off the wall, trying not to be vexed by the curled, worn edges, and spent some time with each one. The baby pictures, school

photos, backyard snaps, and the one we posed for during visitation one year in, with the tropical beach background. Amara's 13 now and Theo just turned 8, and it's six months since I've seen them. Like always, I saw how much Amara looks like me, and wondered how hard that's been. People used to say, *Girl, you spit her out*, and I'd smile, like it was some kind of trick or spell I'd managed, while hoping things would turn out different for her. Same wide nose. Same full lips I got from Mama, who told me I could learn to hold them in and "minimize" them, like she had. They got me teased when I was little and cruised before I was even grown. Same freckles and eyes that shift from green to brown, depending on who knows what... my contrary mood, that's what Mama said... mud with a bit of algae, in my opinion, though I've heard them called by fancier names.

Black folks, we're still obsessed with eyes and skin color and hair, and all my life people have either praised my eyes or decided I think I'm the shit for having them. Whatever. It's not like I went to Walmart and picked them out. We all know what they come from: Ownership. Possession. Rape. Anyway, I hope Amara uses hers for seeing.

In Theo's face, like always, I saw Jasper. He's got his father's sharp nose, which people love to focus on... *dark, but keen featured*, Mama would say... and his deep plum skin, instead of the russet brown of mine and Amara's. Like Daddy's, his eyes are dark and sparkly. But sometimes when I look at my boy I feel like his father's still among the living, and I work at recalling what drew me to him, the pluses, instead of the minuses.

Wondering just who my kids are now, and what it'll take for them to forgive me, my heart started banging around, and I laced my fingers together to stop them from shaking, then fished my cards from the pile to play some solitaire and thought some love over to my kids across the miles.

I pictured my boy, tender and easy to cry, asking his nonstop questions. *What are dogs feeling when they bark? Why aren't the double o's in "look" and "loon" pronounced the same? Why are leaves green?* And Amara, asking whether thinking you can do something makes you better at it, why her teachers talk down to the students in her class, whether a family is something you're born into or something that's decided. I hope Val and Jessie at least try and answer the questions about facts. *How far away are the planets? What do you call a dolphin's tail?* I know the

harder ones are the problem. *What does “mother” mean? Which fights are worth it? How can you tell where you belong?*

Keisha left her post at the window and climbed back up. She went still, slipping under, and I closed my eyes. Sleep would be hard to come by, and I prayed to get through one last night and morning without a shakedown storm.

Heartsick at losing Maxine as I gained my freedom, I tried to focus on the blessing of having been with her at all. And then I named what I was grateful for, moving from macro to micro. I had someone who'd loved me right. People on the outside who'd never stopped showing up. Children I could still earn back. One thousand one hundred and fifty-nine clean days, but who's counting? A novel I'd just finished that was echoing through me. Trees that would soon be in reach. And the photo of Amara, torn down the middle by a shakedown boot heel, had survived. I had mended it, and here it was, on the pile right beside me.

Out loud, I said, “I don't know their favorite colors,” speaking to I-don't-know-who, just trying to get a sounding in the big, wide dark. I expected no answer from Keisha and got none, but I could hear her breathing and it was a comfort, that thread of body music just above my head.

Then morning came. The sky faded to stubborn gray. The lights came on and the morning noise kicked off, and when they hadn't come to set me free I went to chow and couldn't eat a bite. Looked for Maxine, but she didn't show.

Two COs came for me soon after, barking orders to get my things and come with them. Like usual, they looked at me like I'm trash, even though the places they come from were at least as shitty and broken as the ones that grew most of us in here, even though they and theirs know the same rung where we've bottomed, turnkey being the other path out of the basement so many of us know.

And now I'm waiting to be told I'm free to go.

I stop trying to call up my pomegranate. It's gone, for now. So I start my silent chant: *Get to Auntie Jessie's. Meetings. Job. My own place. My kids.* I can do it. I'm never coming back.

My two aces are my aunties. Daddy's baby sister, Val, she got a job in Boston and moved here to help. Since he died she's been carrying the whole thing by herself. The house, the kids, they're off-limits to me. And she's in charge.

And big sis Jessie, she's letting me crash with her for a couple months, even though she just got out of the rehab from her stroke. I can stay until my cousin Gil gets back from Afghanistan, where the warring never seems to end. Jessie, she stood by me when I screwed up, disappeared, relapsed. Until she didn't.

She drew a hard line with me, but she kept on showing up for Amara and Theo. And once I had 30 days clean, she came to visit, along with Daddy and the kids. Sent me cards and photos and novels from Amazon. Put money on my books, adding to my 72-cents-an-hour "job" doing laundry, cleaning, flag sewing, kitchen work, minus the half taken out for forced savings and the deductions for medical fees, account activity fees, disciplinary violations. Jessie said she'll give me shelter, and I know the deal. Long as I'm working my program, I can stay.

Soon as they say so, I'll be walking through the gate, a year since they let me out to say good-bye to Daddy. Wake or funeral, I had to choose and picked the former, unsure I could keep my shit together for the funeral, arriving in church with escorts, everyone's eyes on me. At least I had a few quiet, private minutes with Daddy during the viewing at the funeral home. Soon, when I can bear it, I'll visit his grave.

Looking at him lying in his coffin, I thought he seemed peaceful, unburdened. Unlike Mama, who seemed to still be raging, still saying no to me. Now I've lost Daddy, who said yes even when he shouldn't have.

I was swamped by sadness as I stood beside his body, and by anger, too, the general kind, at all the things: the world, the way things work, the "carceral state," my lot. And at Daddy, too, I admit it, for leaving me. Before I walked away from his casket I closed my eyes and imagined slipping my two-year sobriety chip into the pocket of his suit.

Jessie and Val were standing at the door to the viewing room, exhausted. Wrecked. Greeting the neighbors and friends from work and church who filed in, and at least I was spared making small talk about what felt like the end of the world. Amara and Theo sat together in the corner, looking numb and out of reach, blaming me, no doubt, for taxing Daddy till he broke. I hugged them, but their arms hung limp. They were going through the motions with me. Daddy, the backbone, he was the hard loss.

The aftershocks still hit, and the sadness body-slams me again and again, just when I think my mourning is done. Feels like a part of me now, like the rainy-weather ache of a mended bone. We're all still standing, but I can't help worrying about the TPR law. Termination of Parental Rights, if you can believe that, and if that ever does go down, I'll be thinking on joining Daddy, and I know ways, fast and slow, to do that.

I get \$75 gate money in cash and a check for the \$264.57 in my account, and peek in the bag they give me, the stuff I came in with four years ago. I keep the keys and throw the purse in the trash. It's winter in America, I'm making a new start, and along with the windbreaker they let me keep, my lightweight sweats and T-shirt will have to get me home. They show me where to change and I force my expanding hips into them, then return my DOC scrubs, grab the bag with my belongings, and hold on tight to my release sheet, my hands shaking so bad the papers flap like white flags: *Okay, I still surrender. Whatever you say still goes.*

I try and imagine myself singing, but seems like that's over. Lost in the crash that landed me here.

I try and see myself down the road in my own cozy apartment, but the hallway's as far as I usually get. I try to forget the room where I last holed up, tornadoed with covers and clothes, unwashed dishes and pizza boxes and the bitter, vinegar smell of cooked-up drugs. And if I'm not careful with my imagining, my before blocks out everything that might could happen, pushing it all together into a shakedown pile, and I'm in the middle, yelling, *Remember me? There's a sista in here, trying to breathe her way into tomorrow. Remember me?*

I stand up, like I'm told. And as I approach the gates, the CO who's opening them up gives me a last bit of scorn: "Hasta luego; see you back here soon." I throw some shade his way and walk through. And here it is, what I've been wanting and fearing. Freedom.

TWO

Waiting for the taxi that'll take me to the bus, I stand here shivering in the February cold, looking at the walls and razor wire from the other side now, blinded by the sunlight. One hand shielding my eyes from the glare, I whisper: "Good-bye."

Good-bye to the funk of captivity and fear. Good-bye to my little tomb. Good-bye to everyone who's still fighting to keep alive in there. Good-bye to Maxine. A sudden wind blows sandy grit in my face. I close my eyes and look away.

I keep checking my cheap plastic watch and here's the taxi, pulling up. I climb in, and the ride's a blur of barren trees, frozen ground and tire tracks, grass, and plants that are sleeping or dead.

When the taxi lets me out, I run to catch the bus, and after the door unseals with a big air-freshener-on-body-funk exhale, I step up and say hello to the brotha in the driver's seat, like I was taught. I find a window seat in the back and settle in, remembering all at once how much I hate February in Massachusetts, though it's all I know. Me and my cousin Judy used to call it the tunnel month, when it's hard to even imagine the light of March and April up ahead. Gray, everywhere you look. Strip malls rush by and then there's concrete highway all around, and I lean against the window and try to slow down everything that's rushing through my head and breathe.

Finally, I see Boston, coming into view. The paint-dripped gas tank and choppy harbor, South Bay, where Jasper landed twice. And now we're in the Big Dig tunnel, where I always panic over what'll happen if there's a crash down here in the wall-to-wall traffic and help can't reach us.

When we resurface, my heart's knocking like an old radiator. Traces of dirty snow line the streets and people hurry to wherever they're going, scowling, hunched against the cold in their puffer coats. We pull onto a dark South Station bus ramp, winding around to the gate, and soon as I get off I'm drowning. Voices and phones ringing and music blaring. The crush of people pulling bags that bump and clack across the tiles. Disembodied announcements of arrivals and departures. The smells of exhaust, burnt coffee, perfume, piss, and food. The colors, swamping me. I look for the emptiest spot I can find and sit for a minute to collect myself.

While I'm watching people going in and out of the bathrooms, I see a woman leaning on the wall as she tips out, and I feel the edge of a muddy memory. Thank God I can't recall exactly what went down, but I can smell the grime and misery, I can feel the tiled floor and see stalls tagged with tributes and insults, and I suspect I did some time in there on my knees.

I turn away and try to keep my head above my before. Fuck. I'ma have to start crocheting again, or take up knitting... something that'll keep my hands busy and my mind quiet. A hobby where you end up with something lovely you can hold and feel, that you actually created. Right now, though, I'm looking, looking, looking at everything swirling around me, wondering is everyone looking at me, or past me. Either way, I'm a musty smell, a stubborn stain. Down-and-out, pitiful, on the verge of doing wrong or about to burst into angry protest that our lives matter.

Most folks look unhappy, hostile, checked out, even though they're walking around free, and man, that brings me down. I haven't figured out how Maxine keeps her eyes open without being flattened by what she sees.

It takes me 15 minutes, but I get up and take the escalator down, seeing myself through the eyes of the people riding up, and Lord, if I don't stop this train of thought, I'll never make it to Jessie's; I'll just hit the corner and opt out before I even try, settling on the sidewalk like a torn balloon.

At a meeting last week, someone raised her hand and shared that tale. Soon as she was gated out, she rode back to the city and went directly... didn't pass go, didn't collect a cent... to Mass & Cass. Never even made it home. And Aquila, she OD'd before she even found a place to stay. And just last week I saw Caprice

Johnson, back inside after six months. “Hey, Cherry,” she said, using the name I’ve tried to leave behind, and asked me where she could get her high on.

I climb onto the city bus, where the heat’s blasting and folks are packed in tight and trying to lose themselves on the Facebook and Instagram scroll, or listening to music, earbuds in. Me? I’ve gotta use pure mental power to refuse the smells of perfume and shampoo, sweat and sour breath and wet wool, the humming and sniffing and coughing, the bouncing legs and nervous finger tapping, the cleavage and armpits and unfamiliar patches of skin all up in my personal space. I try and shut down my senses, and here I am, taking a ride through my before.

Even with a blindfold I could get to Jessie’s. The streets are talking to me, and it’s a good thing the bus is noisy enough to muffle what they’re saying, since most of it is not good. I wish I could get lost, but I swear, I’m circling the drain of my past.

And then, thank God, I remember something good. I pass a stretch of elms and see myself at 13, riding free on the black BMX bike Daddy got me, Lori Watson beside me on her aqua-blue cruiser for a minute, and then solo. I said I was going to the library and took off, feeling like motion itself, trying to see what was out there beyond the world I knew. Broke my curfew and ignored the fact that some parts of the city had become war zones, crack claiming some folks and bullets, others. And rode on, knowing I’d have to take my punishment later, in keeping with the talent for trouble Mama said I had. Underfed, punished, silenced, I lied and defied Mama to get outside. She was clueless, anyway. She had no idea where was safe and where wasn’t.

The bus chugs on, and finally, a seat opens up. I sit, balancing my sorry little bag of stuff on my lap, and turn away from the crotches in my line of sight while I try to conjure something good. Leaning back against the cloudy window, I think of Daddy doing his favorite thing: fishing at Blue Hills in the pre-dawn dark. I went with him twice. The first time, after Mama died, was grim, but placid. The second was a full-on disaster.

Can I get there, from this landlocked state of mind? I focus in and try to bring him close, but instead of the fishing trip redo I’m after, I get the one I’ve tried to forget. There I am next to Daddy at the water’s edge. Unfree, Black, and 21. No

prospects. No direction. No occupation, besides Jasper. Just bent on wildness and aimless resistance, while Daddy tries to break down his fishing code.

The smell of Popeyes pulls me back to the present, praise God, but I turn to see a teenage couple wrist deep in chicken, which brings on other memories. Too many workdays and late-night runs after too many things I'm trying to leave behind.

The body, it remembers.

I never did go to Blue Hills with him after that second failure, but Daddy kept on fishing, and he took the kids. "I'll be there till the day I die," he said once when I called from Oak Hills. "And if you ever put me in a home, I'll just escape and drag my heart monitor *and* my oxygen tank to the water's edge, need be."

"That would drive the fish away." I laughed, but I could picture the green blip of his monitor in the morning darkness. His heart, seen by all the living things as they wakened.

I'll take them fishing, Daddy. And soon as I can, I'll buy a pomegranate in your name. And instead of tearing into it, I'll try and wait. Then open it real slow, catching my breath at the seeds before I close my eyes and go back with you to the reservoir, where everything's quiet and I'm awake enough to hear the good news beating underneath our ordinary Black skin.

I get off and walk the last couple blocks to Auntie Jessie's, cursing the cutthroat wind that tears through my flimsy jacket, then wait till she buzzes me in. And here I am at her door, mustering up the strength to knock. I take a deep meditation inhale to ground me in the here and now, and do it. "Coming, just you hold on!" she calls out, and I wait, so nervous I'm trembling, until she gets the door open. And here she is, standing with one hand on her walker and holding out the other to welcome me.

I haven't seen her since before her stroke eight months ago, and I can't believe its toll. She's bent and thin, and her freckled face has been hollowed out and pulled south. The short 'fro she's always worn is mostly gray. But she's got on her reddish-plum lipstick. Never leaves the house without it, says it "livens up" her face. And I can still see the pride and grit in her eyes that always did make me respect her, even... maybe especially... when I was messing up.