



JUNIE

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Attend me, hold me in your muscular flowering arms, protect me from throwing any part of myself away.

—AUDRE LORDE



1.

Summer was dying and the once viridescent edges of the leaves transformed as a ring of orange crawled toward their centres. It seemed to be happening earlier this year. Autumn was Junie's most-loved season, and not because of the unfolding of a new school term, but because she sensed that nature was given a second chance to rebirth itself, to start anew, a sentiment she often wanted for herself.

Junie took in a generous breath and closed her eyes. The air was smoke-filled but sweet, and jasmine and lavender pooled in her throat. She swirled her tongue around her mouth, letting the tip slip between the narrow gaps of her teeth. She inhaled again. The savoury scent of hickory wafted from the smokers in the street—this was how Junie imagined paradise. She stood fluid amidst all the clanking, shouting, doors slamming, and back and forth of truth-telling on street corners.

Junie floated behind her mother down the unfamiliar yet bustling streets of their new neighbourhood. An unexpected gust of warm wind brushed the backs of her ears. She studied a few of the neighbours, two men and one woman, knee deep in soil. The wooden sign planted in the dirt read EAST END COMMUNITY GARDEN. They were poking shallow oblong holes into the earth with their steady fingers, maybe to check the readiness of the soil. Then they pulled and tugged on clusters of green vegetables and piled them into wooden

baskets. She imagined the mud under their fingernails and how sticking a small twig behind each nail, sweeping away the grime in one swoop, would be effortless. There was a peacefulness in watching them work, their backs bent and their eyes veiled by wide-brimmed hats. As they methodically dug into the earth, loud, rhythmic grunts escaped their parted lips. The men wore brown overalls with patterned shirts underneath. The woman's white dress was bunched up above her knees. Together, their humming was slight. A tune Junie could not name. Behind them, the sun slipped to the rear of a tall brick building, the veils of their hats pointless. Was this how they got through hard times? Junie had overheard many conversations about community and what it meant to work together. Six bent knees instead of two. Sixty fingernails filled with more than a day's worth of dirt.

As Junie and her mother continued their walk toward the small row house they were about to call home, the back of Junie's small hand grazed the back of her mother's, the warmth an immediate transfer. A jolt. Junie lifted her eyes, shooting daggers into the sludge-coloured sky, and then turned a soft glance toward her mother, but Maddie shoved her hand into her coat pocket and turned her face into the wind. Junie's gaze sunk down to her shoes. One sole had partially detached from its housing. Just like her insides; clinging to a whole that never truly belonged to her. Junie wanted to glue it shut. She needed to keep something beautiful and lush and have it belong to her. All she asked for was to sit comfortably in this knowing and hold tight what no one would ever dare take from her.

Suitcases in hand, they turned the corner past The Golden

Petal, the town flower shop. Junie's eyes illuminated at the assortment of flamboyant plants and flowers. She counted all the colours in her head. People squeezed past one another on the narrow sidewalks and Junie admired how quickly everyone seemed to move. A pile of worn furniture sat on the curb like a family of abadoned stray dogs, their fur matted. Maddie stopped, lowered her suitcases onto the cement and sucked her teeth.

"People have no shame, I tell you. All these things sitting on the curb like this, it's sad. Truly pitiful. And look at those overflowing garbage cans on the corner."

Junie listened to the way her body gave her signals; communicated with her. The pounding in her small chest told her not to ask questions and especially not the ones that came burning into her head like fireballs.

"Maybe they're moving, Mama. Like us."

Maddie pushed her hand up her wide hip. Her doe eyes scorched right through the pile of wood and plastic shelving. A softness curled into her face, her cheeks untightened, jowls materialized around her jaw like whipped butter. That buttering was there for only a second. It disappeared just as quickly as it showed up. But there was no tucking it away. Junie wanted to paint her mother's eyes. Hold her gaze there. Freeze time.

Maddie shook her head and dusted invisible dirt off her skirt like the filth from the mangy furniture had clung to her. Like she was too good, like she deserved better than what she had. "Junie, let's get going. Now, I have a lot of unpacking to do, and I don't have time to talk about this place. Not yet." Maddie pulled a small scrap of paper from her pocket and

squinted. "106 Prior Street. This way, come on, girl, let's go." Junie followed.

"But Mama, don't you want to g—"

"Girl, why are you always beating your gums? I'm not going to stand here talking with you about whether someone moved or didn't move. Why does it matter? I have important things to do and the last thing I need is for these curls that I just paid good money for to fall out." Maddie poofed her hair with her hands as she walked, never dropping the suitcase.

Junie, overwhelmed by the mouthful that had fallen like fire from her mother's lips, did as she was told. Her head was as heavy as a bucket of street coal. She tried hard not to fall too far behind her mother. The back of her mother's neck glared at her. Scolded her.

Junie's eyes darted from building to building, from brown face to brown face. Their old neighbourhood was not like this. It was cold. She was often afraid, and shivered under her covers most nights, the waning moon sending icicles down her small body. The sidewalks were empty, and everyone who wasn't like them scooted along in cars. Dogs sauntered down the tree-lined streets attached to long leather leashes with tight-lipped white people clutching the other end. But here, there was so much flavour to behold. Pleasant feelings and tingly sensations skirted down Junie's spine into the worn insides of her black shoes.

She ran to catch up with her mother, who was still spouting, even in Junie's momentary absence. As they continued to walk, Junie scanned the small box-shaped shops that hugged one another's walls and lined the busy streets. She flinched at the roaring horns and bells on doors, and the loud voices

screaming of weekend plans. This neighbourhood was already a sweltering hug around her shoulders, it was like she were in the midst of some big family gathering where everyone had something to shout out from across the room. Her face already battered from smiling at all the people who passed by in their slender column skirts pinched tight at the waist and cut just below the knee, the men with hats tilted at angles and their suspenders holding up their loose, highwaisted pants, and the children whose hands were gripped tightly in the hands of their mother, or father, or uncle, or grandparent. Most looked like her, but some didn't. Now that she was here, she couldn't imagine living anywhere else. Although the specific reason for the move was unclear to Junie, she was certain it had to do with Maddie losing her last job at Jack's Lounge. Her mother was always spouting off about Mr. Evans, the owner, and how he didn't understand her. How she was "too much woman" for him, whatever that meant. Or maybe it was that other place, The Bilt. Her mother jawed off often about so many clubs and lounges that they all sat in one blurred pile in Junie's head. But all the same, Junie was glad to leave their old neighbourhood behind.

"It's about time we get you ready for school, don't you think? In a few days you'll be starting a new year, new school, new nosy people asking questions. I can't have people knowing you're *my* child when you can't do anything to that hair. Maybe some ribbons would do that head some good."

Junie's eyes immediately fell to the ground.

"Yes, ma'am."

Maddie stopped and pulled her hand from her pocket, pointing a slim, brown finger in Junie's face, her fingernails bayonets. "Girl, what did I tell you about calling me that? What, do I look like an old woman to you? Save that talk for the old grey-hairs in church, you hear me?"

"Yes, Mama."

"That's better."

Maddie pulled a pack of Du Mauriers out from her purse and lit one as they walked.

"You're gonna be all right, girl. Just need to think, that's all," Maddie said between puffs. "You need to slow down and stop asking so many goddamn questions."

I SIT ACROSS FROM my mother, my arms folded gingerly in my lap. We sit together, but apart, at our small kitchen table, eating each other's silence around a plate of toast and two half-full glasses of powdered milk, the edges crusted with white. A sliver of sunlight shoulders its way into the room through the sheer curtains that hang above the large double sink. The cadenced sound of the slow-dripping water from the faucet pools into a greasy salad bowl. I listen as the water rises. How can so many droplets fill the dips and valleys like that? How long does it take for each tiny drop of water to build a community in a small bowl? I focus on the sound. It hammers through my ears in time with the thunderous pressure in my chest. I search the table for the berried jam, jam that has disappeared just as quickly as Mama's wages. Mama's eyes clutch mine and then release. The split second of guilt in her gaze is quickly replaced with indifference. "Eat your toast, little girl." Mama wraps her lips around a cigarette, then exhales a fog of smoke that hovers above the bread like a rain cloud.