

**Animal Tales & The Modern-Life Fairy Tale:
An examination of sexuality and the black experience**

By Unah Cader

*For J — thank you for being a woodcutter in a world full of wolves,
and an inspiration to my work.*

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Wolf

It's one of the hottest days of summer. The air feels warm and brittle, causing my T-shirt to cling to my body. A trickle of sweat slowly carves a brook down the small of my back burying itself in the fabric encircling my waist. My Blackberry springs to life revealing the time: 4:08pm. It's far too early to go home yet. The yellowing grass scratches at the underneath of my bare legs as they shift their weight. The few survivors of the shaving session earlier this morning stand defiant against my palm as it brushes over the leg's naked skin. The shower had initially scalded, but was quickly domesticated with a swivel of the tap. Our family bathroom had become foggy as hordes of droplets collected on the sweating walls, glistening under the light. Water trickled down my body in rivulets, creating miniature waterfalls off the tip of my nose and nipples, only to be lost in the masses at my feet and sucked away down the drain. Spending too long in the shower had made me late for college.

Resurfacing, I glare out across the park spotting a woman in a hijab balancing a pair of Célines on her nose whilst restraining her toddler. My leg itches. A high pitched chortle interrupts my reverie, abruptly grounding me. Sophie is lounging against Akash's chest, her pallid elbows resting on his thighs as though he were a comfortable armchair. She hisses something, flicking limp hair over her shoulders, evoking an unpleasant glint in his eyes. Sophie's had two abortions in the last year. I look away and take a mouthful of a now warm fizzy beer. Drinking isn't pleasant, it's sickening, but I do it anyway.

It's Wednesday. We have a half day at college. The day is stiflingly stagnant so we've bought drinks and are indulging in a relaxing afternoon drinking on the lawns in Hyde park. I run a hand through my damp hair guiding the finger-length strands back into position as a sloppy game of football proceeds in the corner of my peripheral vision. The bare-chested boys holler as they dance around sparring like dogs, snapping at each other as they beat the ball to death amongst themselves.

'It's not even six yet - Lets do something,' I say, examining a finger nail.

‘Like what?’ Sophie tickles Akash’s scarce beard and he pulls her closer. Looking away, I wonder at what point between starting class at 9:00am and finishing at 2:00pm they became so close. They barely spoke before today. The sun is dipping below the trees, casting shadows across the park. Finally, a breeze. People slowly begin to drain out of the park, trickling away down the footpaths, leaving behind their litter.

The sun has set completely and the street lamps of St. John’s Wood dance into life. I’m now minus Sophie and Akash, but plus one Nasrin. My Casio blinks at me: 10:47pm. It’s getting late but not late enough yet as Nasrin takes off down the street.

‘That’s the guy I follow on Twitter. His name’s Jordan,’ Nasrin breathes. Looking across the road I see three young men.

‘Which one is he?’ I’m amused.

‘The shortest one!’ she says, flashing her best smile across to them. Before long they’ve herded us to the corner of the pavement and surrounded us. Jordan is talking to Nasrin as the other two stand on either side, watching the pair of us with beady eyes.

‘Wolfy, are you getting that number then?’ one of the guys asks.

‘Is that your name?’ I ask, craning my neck up at him.

‘No, it’s Wolfgang.’ He grins, cocking his unusually large head to the left, his lips cruelly curling up to reveal too much gum and a set of perfectly pointed white veneers. He looks significantly older than his two companions. I laugh, but it comes out louder than expected.

‘Where are you two headed tonight?’ he asks, tapping out the digits of my number on his mobile with a brawny thumb as I dictate them to him. The thick hairs sprouting from his knuckles are quivering in the evening breeze.

‘Home,’ I smile. He has a forest of dense grey-brown chest hair contrasting against his pale skin and protruding from the low cut neck of his T-shirt. This furry infestation seems to cover the length of his arms and from what’s visible, his ankles too.

‘I’ll call you sometime,’ he continues.

‘All right.’

‘We’re having a party at his place tomorrow.’ Wolfgang gestures to the guy with the fur-tail keychain clipped to his belt. ‘Do you two want come?’

‘Yeah, we’ll be there.’ Nasrin answers for me, batting her fake lashes a little too hard. They look like they’re ready to escape from her lids.

‘All right! Well, bye, babe.’ Wolfgang winks at me with a sizeable grey eyeball, before sashaying after his companions. Nasrin lets loose a giggle.

‘Oh my, what big eyes he has!’ She remarks as she slings an arm over my shoulder and chatters about the party, flashing Jordan’s number on her phone proudly in my face.

Soon we find ourselves drowning in the din of clanging cutlery, clichéd pop songs playing overhead, customers gargling sweet sugary drinks and heavy, oil-filled air. My armpit is prickling, begging me to scratch it. Reaching up, I rest on the edge of the counter, feeling grease and salt granules stick to the underneath of my bare elbows. I wince, brush it off and scratch my armpit. We settle ourselves at a corner table, watching the group of adolescent boys on the other side of the shop. Nasrin attacks chicken wing after chicken wing, ripping the crispy battered flesh from the longer bone first before sucking it off the shorter one. She balls up a handful of chips with her long plump fingers, suffocating them in mayonnaise and finally depositing them into her mouth, leaving a greasy sheen all over her hands and the sides of her cheeks. A flake of chicken batter escapes her mouth, landing on the table a few millimetres from my hand, which retreats briskly away into my lap.

‘He’s definitely watching me,’ Nasrin says as she gurgles her drink and tugs on a strand of curly hair. I tell her what she wants to hear.

‘Definitely.’

A fresh-faced boy with a vulturine gleam in his eyes sits across from us. He gives off an unpleasant vibe even though I’m not in his line of sight. It wouldn’t be wise to talk to strangers at this time of

night, especially in an area we aren't familiar with. Nasrin gloatingly smiles. He's approaching our table.

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I'm reclining over the till-point sucking on a chocolate button, contemplating the next nine hours of my shift. Thinking back, I remember having caught the night bus home last night so it must have been late. Though not told off this morning, it was evident Dad was annoyed. Guilt-ridden, I thoroughly cleaned the rabbit's cage, taking her out of her unsanitary misery and giving her a wash in the bathroom sink. Dad had made breakfast in the kitchen in complete silence. Not wanting to stay at home any longer, I had donned a red hoodie and left for work an hour early. I'm not going home tonight; Nasrin and I are going to Wolfgang's house-party.

I yawn but don't cover my mouth, eyes watering furiously. No one can see. There are no customers and the street is empty outside. Rapping my nails against the till screen I check the time: 9:03am.

'Quite a crowd you've got! You busy, love?' It's the guy from Greggs over the road. I laugh.

'Yeah.'

'Do you want anything?'

'No, thanks. I'm great.' I watch as a stray hair quavers outside his nostril.

'You sure? I can make you a coffee!' He smiles as his eyes probe my body.

'Oh no, I'm fine, don't worry,' I nod as his head withdraws from between the glass door and waves as he walks back into Greggs. Feeling awkward, knowing he's watching from over the road, I pretend to be busy cleaning the ice-cream machine round back out of sight.

Morning heaves itself forward into the afternoon, giving way to the dry heat carried on a breeze that floods through the shop doors. My shorts are damp with sweat and slowly fusing themselves to

my thighs. The bowl of pineapple chunks in the fridge display is looking dangerously depleted, so I set myself up with a knife and chopping board facing the window to watch the people passing by.

‘Ahem.’ The gentle sound of someone clearing their throat interrupts and instantly I look up . A young man is standing staring by the till.

‘Can I help you?’

‘Uh, no. I work here. Hi, I’m Jay.’ He extends a dark caramel-toned hand.

‘Oh, hey.’ I shake his hand feeling the tight grasp. It’s warm but his palm feels dry and scratchy. His name had been on the schedule for weeks, but we had never met before today. I watch his bottom lip rise and fall with each word. He needs a set of keys to open the shop tomorrow morning.

‘There should be one just here.’ I bend down opening a drawer under the till. Jay looks away. Rummaging through the drawer, fingering biros, post-it notes, hairy lumps of blue-tac, I eventually find a keyring fat with keys. His soft eyes are fixed on me as I go to test them in the door. He seems guarded, sizing me up like a boxer might his opponent in a match. The keys do not fit the locks. We conclude he should call our manager so he thanks me and leaves smiling, the corners of his eyes gently corrugate as his cheeks rise. He crosses the road to the bicycle racks, his tartan flannel shirt flapping around his heavily built frame. He looks out of place on the corner of the street amidst the market stalls. I imagine him belonging on a river in a forest somewhere chopping logs. Unlocking a bicycle, he mounts it but stops to dig in the back pocket of his jeans. My eyes are drawn slowly to the way his jeans hang around his broad waist, and the way they bulge, stretching the thick denim material over his crotch. And then suddenly he’s gone, swallowed by the crowds of tourists.

It’s 5:00pm and the market is emptying out. The shop is quiet, leaving me yawning against the till point again, listening to the sound of a guitar drifting up the road from a busker somewhere. I pick at the fraying skin on the cuticle of a nail. My phone vibrates. It’s a text from an unknown number. It reads: ‘Hey, its me, Jay, I came into work a couple hours ago. Our manager asked me to collect your set of keys when you finish work tonight. I hope that’s okay.’ I feel flushed, and so

spend the rest of the evening cleaning and dusting the shop down, unable to keep still. Four hours later someone knocks on the glass doors. Jay's round face is up against the glass smiling.

'Hey,' he gently brushes past revealing another young man identical to him only thinner. 'This is my brother. My twin brother.'

'Hi.' I swallow, trying to find some moisture to relieve my dry throat. They stay scrutinisingly quiet as I gather my bag and red hoodie to leave. Jay thanks me again as I place the keys into his hand, the tips of my nails trailing across his open palm. He has several calluses. My hand feels static as it withdraws and buries itself in a pocket.

'Take care!' he calls and I give a pathetic wave as I walk up the road.

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Water droplets patter onto the floor, escaping the towel drying my freshly washed face. Nasrin is gyrating somewhere in the background to the beat of the music coming from her phone. Her large breasts jump up and down on her chest, reminding me of the movement a duvet makes when shaken over a bed. I look away from her flapping body and watch myself walk by in the mirror as we leave. The jeans look too tight. Easing them down at the knees a little, I heave the zip of the red hooded sweatshirt up to the neckline before stepping out.

We bounce back and forth in the faded seats of the N207 bus. The glowing dotted orange letters on the screen up front state the destination and the time. It's just gone 12:30am. Lifting my feet off the sticky floor, I prop them on the back of the seat in front just in time to avoid the river of vomit slithering toward the front of the bus. A girl with black smeared eye shadow like war paint leans against a young man, the residue of vomit on the corners of her mouth. Her sick has crawled under the front seats now, lapping up against an unaware passenger's shoes, as waves of peas and carrots caress the leather soles. Nasrin giggles in amusement as she takes a mouthful from the plastic bottle she mixed when we were back at the house. Her breath smells like disinfectant and orange juice.

There's a shiny patch on my seat where someone has stuck their chewing gum and it's become embedded in the chair. My mobile buzzes: a text message, from Jay: 'Hey, it was great meeting you. You're really beautiful.' I feel my empty stomach churn and the acid slosh about. Unimpressed but secretly flattered by his overtly forward message, I put the phone away and smile contently.

Ealing blinks into view and we stumble off the bus disoriented by the bright lights and swirls of nightlife enthusiasts streaming into the train-station. The bus groans to life rushing away from the bus stop in a blur like a frightened spirit. Nasrin leads the way up a suburban cul-de-sac toward the muted sound of music coming from a lit front window of the house with an Audi parked in front. Wolfgang and Jordan greet us at the door with drinks in hand.

'Hey, gorgeous.' Wolfgang pulls me through the door with a sweep of his arm. His sharp elbow digs into my shoulder. I shake him and roam into the large open-plan kitchen following the others.

'Great party!' I scan the room noticing it's just Wolfgang, Jason and their friend with the fur tail we met the other night. Nasrin frowns. Drinks are poured in small glasses that look like reused Nutella jars and the pack ascend upstairs. I follow feeling the thick fibres of the carpet squeeze between my toes. The living room door opens and the smell of marijuana, sweat and cheap perfume hugs us as we join the swaying crowd.

'Enjoying yourself?' Wolfgang prowls out of the crowd. My watch glares up at me. It's 2:16am already. He grins. His large protruding ears wag under the brim of his baseball cap.

'Yeah, I'm great,' I nod and unsteadily swallow an erupting hiccup.

'How about we get another drink from downstairs?' He leads the way out of the room and suddenly I'm sinking into a soft leather sofa in a different room listening to the dull sound of laughter from upstairs. Wolfgang pounces over to the sofa, handing me a drink and beginning to softly howl. Drowning in tiredness, I force my eyes to stay open, feeling a sense of urgency tugging somewhere on my scalp. It stings. Nasrin is nowhere to be seen.

'Can we go back now?' I slur. Wolfgang continues to purr, but he sounds as though he's underwater and I struggle to make out anything coherent. He begins to paw at my inner thigh,

scratching ferociously. I want to go back upstairs. My heart is beating loudly in my ears. He rips my red hoodie off, snarling as he does so, and I struggle away from his clawing grasp. The Nutella glass drops to the floor. Its content fleeing the glass and vanishing as it sinks into the carpet leaving a wet patch. Wolfgang stalks over from the sofa and kneels on all fours by my side. I watch helplessly as the drink soaks out of the carpet into the denim encasing his knees. A pale hairy arm reaches down to my chest as I flap like a suffocating fish on the prickly carpet. His damp nose is up against my neck, sniffing aggressively, breathing out hot air. My throat is dry like sandpaper. He growls softly in my ear exploring the crevices around my ear lobe. Two sizeable blue eyes warp into view, almost making me cross-eyed, trying to focus on them at such close range. I'm finding it hard to breathe. Suddenly his hand is on my face, slamming my head to the left, squashing me into the carpet. I cry out in pain, but taste the carpet muffling me. Wolfgang breathes heavily and drops down to the floor, his mouth opening to reveal his brilliant white veneers and the stale odour of his breathe. My body is trembling. His broad tongue is on my face. Slimy and wet, he licks the length of my cheek. Suddenly the door swings open, making a deafening cracking sound on impact with Wolfgang's forehead. He falls back with a sharp howl. A familiar set of eyes followed by a blur of two muscular brown arms cloud my vision as it begins to go dark. My head is aching as I struggle to understand why Jay is here.

It's 5:03am. I straighten up in the seat. Jay draws my attention with a wave of his hand. He's perched on a green electrical box by the bus stop.

'How are you feeling?'

'Tired,' I sigh. 'How did you know where I was?'

'I didn't. A friend invited me to the party, and I saw you go downstairs.' He trails off. 'I'm glad you're okay.'

'Thank you,' I smile weakly at him, feeling a pang of shame for not having answered his message earlier. Jay approaches, reaching out to wrap my red hooded sweatshirt around me and gently zipping it up. I nod a thank you but he grabs my chin bringing it to a standstill.

‘You’re welcome.’ He plants a brief kiss on my forehead as our bus pulls in. We hug awkwardly then let go, but he continues to tuck me into my hooded sweatshirt. His lips part as a smile reveals a pair of razor-edged canines.

‘When can I call you then?’

Teeth

Junior kicked the wet gravel in the front driveway, watching as the little stones ricocheted off a nearby car creating a metallic echo. He regarded the prickly rose bushes lining the front garden. They had belonged to his mother. She had planted them when she and his father first moved over. When he was young, he remembered sitting on the wall in front of the house in the heat of summer watching her work on the garden. The brick wall would often be warm from the sun and sometimes burn the underneath of his legs. Now the rose bushes were ugly, shrivelled plants, choked by nettles and blackened by frost, dead like their proprietress. The front garden had been inhabited by a mob of weeds, some growing taller than the rose bushes themselves, shading them from daylight. Junior grimaced, pulling the front door shut behind him and stepping out onto the road. Clambering into his car, he waited, resting his bandaged fractured hand on the steering wheel, shivering, as the engine warmed up. The Renault coughed to life as Junior swiftly reversed it out into the road, truculently beeping at an approaching car in his path. He let out a sharp whistle as he yanked the gear stick and took off down the road, aware of the clock on the dashboard.

Finally sitting in the barely furnished waiting room, Junior knocked the heels of his boots together watching the receptionist discreetly picking at her left nostril from behind the computer screen. Despite leaving late he had arrived with five minutes to spare before his appointment. A teenager in a tracksuit sat with his mother in the corner by the water dispenser, whilst a middle-aged, overweight man with uneven facial hair dozed on the opposite side of the room. Junior ran his tongue over his front teeth, suddenly feeling a strange gummy sensation as it slipped through a gap between his lateral incisors. His back went rigid in the chair. It had been several weeks but still came as a shock every time his tongue probed the space where his two front teeth used to be. His eyes stung.

‘Mr Johnson?’ The receptionist called out to him.

‘Yeah,’ he replied, waving his good hand.

‘You can go through now, please.’ She smiled, the pale brown mole on her chin protruding. Junior wandered down the corridor until he reached Toni’s office. The door was ajar and he could see Toni roosting in a chair, her feet resting on the bin under the desk. Disgruntled, he pushed the door open with his foot and helped himself to a seat.

‘So, how have you been getting on since our last meeting, Junior?’ Toni asked, flitting across the room and back to shut the door. She watched him from the corner of her eye, remembering the first time they met. It had been a Tuesday afternoon some weeks ago, and he had refused to shake her hand. She had wanted to feel offended by the seemingly indignant and intimidating man, but couldn’t bring herself to be so after looking him in the eye.

‘Fine,’ Junior responded, picking at the fraying edge of the bandage on his hand.

‘Are you finding these sessions beneficial?’

‘No, not really.’ Junior stared at her firmly.

‘Why are you here then?’ she asked, adjusting her bottom in her seat. He was so hard to get through to. She questioned whether she would be so eager to help him if she it wasn’t her job.

‘Because they said I had to come to these damn anger management classes after the incident!’ Junior frowned.

‘I appreciate your honesty,’ Toni fake-laughed, before half-pretending to shuffle through a pile of paper whilst explaining the structure of the day’s session. She took a long sip from a mug and replaced it on the low table between them.

The carpet in her office was grey; grey and boring. Junior could still remember that grey morning on the playground in Year Two. The sky had threatened to snow the previous night, but had not delivered. Instead a thin layer of muddy frost had coated the ground making his shoes glide over the pavement. Hoping to get a kiss from Mary R, Junior had brought his only candy cane into school as a peace offering, and they had met on the roundabout by the green slide during the morning break. She had told him she didn’t kiss coloured boys and that he should kiss Nikita instead and then she’d run off. Someone got on the roundabout and started spinning it. Junior watched as she spun out of

view. His stomach lurching violently. Later he hurled his pink and green candy cane at the back window of the gymnasium, making a hollow ringing sound as the candy cracked into pieces on the tarmac. Everyone left for the Christmas holiday that afternoon and Junior had never been more glad to go home. Fifteen years later, the thought of Mary R's unpleasant comment still stung. It had been the first of many.

'Junior,' Toni's voice pulled him back to the present. He scowled inwardly at her.

'Yeah, definitely,' he answered, nodding, oblivious to what she was saying. Her forehead creased slightly.

'So we've been speaking about possible triggers for your anger over the last few weeks, and you talked about your primary school,' Toni continued. 'Looking back, when do you think your aggressive behaviour peaked?'

'I'm not sure.' Junior didn't feel like talking.

'It's safe to say that negative racial remarks, justifiably, are predominant causes for your aggression. Tell me more about primary school.' Toni encouraged, trying to push him further.

'Well, the first time I hit anyone was when I was ten. His name was James.'

'Why did you hit him?'

'He asked why I was darker than the other kids at school and made a fool out of me. So I punched him.' Junior cupped his hand to stop it from trembling. Now at twenty-three he still found himself infuriated. His hands would often shake like leaves in heavy rain.

'What made you do that, Junior?' she asked.

'Frustration, I guess,' he said quietly. The empty space left by his front teeth made him lisp and was embarrassing. He felt ugly and pathetic. He couldn't even face himself in the mirror anymore without tearing up and wanting to smash it. Junior's ears began to burn as blood rushed to them. Toni was still talking.

'Junior, you need to address the racial problems you're fighting against, only then can we really tackle your anger issues.'

‘I told you! I don’t know!’ Junior bellowed at her, jumping to his feet, knocking the coffee table over accidentally. Sheets of paper took to the air fluttering around like a swarm of dragonflies before settling, scattered over the carpet. Toni’s cup rocked back and forth on the floor on its side, the teabag gone astray, wet and flaccid on the carpet like a discarded condom.

‘Is everything all right, Toni?’ The concerned voice came from a woman standing in the now open door.

‘Of course. We’re just working hard, don’t worry. Thank you, Linda,’ Toni grinned, dismissing it with a wave of her hand. ‘Could you shut the door on your way out, please?’

Linda looked distraught as she pulled the door shut keeping her eyes fixed on the length of the six foot Junior. He stood in the middle of the room staring at Toni as his breathing slowed. She sat with her back arched straight, watching him carefully from under her lids. Tense with frustration she nudged her upturned mug on the floor, watching as it wobbled.

‘I think you do know, Junior. Sometimes the key isn’t in letting go, it’s in simply not letting it bring you down,’ she said as she moved to open the office door.

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Rolling over in bed, Junior stared at the blank ceiling. It was so overcast outside that the room looked as though it could already be evening. Toni fleetingly crossed his mind as he peeled the damp bed-sheets off his bare skin. He was seeing her today. Somehow he didn’t dread it as much as he felt he should. He perched naked on the edge of the bed, feeling his balls shy away from the cold morning air embracing them. He dressed and went downstairs. Christmas had come and gone leaving only the dried up tree quietly shedding its needles on the carpet. Junior’s father, Mr Johnson, roosted in a chair facing the television set. His forehead was furrowed in concentration further defining the already distinct lines chiselled into his skin. The living room was dim except for the blinking light of the TV and the angry orange glimmer of the tip of Mr Johnson’s roll-up

cigarette. As he spotted Junior, a shadow of a smile appeared, crumpling up his face like a used paper bag.

‘Is it that time of week already?’

‘Yeah, Pops,’ Junior sighed as an armchair swallowed him.

‘How are the sessions going, anyway?’ his Dad grunted.

‘The social worker doesn’t know what she’s doing. She doesn’t understand what I’ve been through.’ Junior picked at the scab on his bottom lip where it had been split open some weeks back. Hunger pinched the corners of his stomach. Rising, he squeezed his dad’s shoulder on the way out the front door to his car.

Toni wore an oversized linen shirt that morning, her cropped hair damp as she sat in her usual spot at the desk. Her cup of tea roosted safely on the corner of her desk, away from sudden movement. Junior caught a glimpse of one of her small breasts hiding shyly behind the open collar of her shirt as she leant forward to pick something off the floor. A light brown nipple poked the fabric of her shirt, indenting it and then vanished from view as she sat up abruptly. It had been a quiet start to the day.

‘I think it’s time we addressed the incident that lead to our current situation,’ Toni said in a matter-of-fact voice, trying to avoid the awkwardness that she knew would follow. Junior’s thighs tensed, his right knee beginning to bounce up and down.

‘I got in a fight,’ Junior stated, his voice sounding tight.

‘Just carry on,’ Toni encouraged, impressed he was willing to talk today. ‘It won’t do you any harm to talk.’

She subtly spun her chair facing askew from him, so as not to intimidate him. Instead she peeped out the window watching the sea of aerals on the roofs outside bobbing in the wind. Junior’s deep husky voice crackled overhead.

‘It was my birthday, and we had gone out to celebrate. Someone insulted me and things got heated and out of hand. So I hit him. He hit me back, in the face. And I hit him again. And again.

And again.’ Junior could feel his ears burning. He glanced up at Toni who was looking out the window.

‘Good,’ she replied.

Slightly thrown by her response to his violent account, Junior straightened up, peering at her as she swivelled her chair back around to face him directly. Her eyes were hostile and narrowed. She felt her hand trembling on the armrest of the chair.

‘Carry on,’ she said.

Junior remembered that night clearly. He had attentively ironed his favourite shirt. Toothpaste had dripped down the front of it as he brushed teeth. A white crusty stain had appeared, and no matter how many times he wiped it with water, he couldn’t shake it. Arriving at the nightclub had sadly been the highlight of the night. He felt the adrenaline rush around his body as the deafening thud of the speakers weighed him down and the crowd swayed and trampled on each other’s toes. His trainers had stuck to the floor with each step as sugary drinks sloshed over the brims of plastic cups and onto the floor. The aftertaste of each shot of alcohol heated his blood making him feel warm and full of energy. He felt excited but so alone in the dark, the strobe lights panicking across the room illuminating the faces of people lacking in spatial awareness. Parting the sea of ravers, Junior had made it across the room, where he stumbled into a gap at the bar. He immediately became aware of a hand on his shoulder. A young man was pressed up against Junior, his small pale face yelling something over the music.

‘Mate, I was here first. You pushed in front.’ The young man gently tugged on Junior’s shoulder trying to guide him out of the way. Junior let out a little laugh. Shaking his head, he brushed the guy’s hand off him and attempted to order his drink. The man’s voice was in his ear again, only this time it sounded tense.

‘I said we were here first, nigger!’ He pushed Junior to the side, inserting his body into the gap at the bar. Shock and pain seared through Junior’s body as he turned to face the man. Suddenly his knuckles connected with the soft tissue of the man’s cheek, rippling the skin on his face. Junior’s

knuckles stung from the impact with the man's cheekbone. Suddenly hands grabbed him from behind. Fists buried themselves between his ribs and shoulder blades as he lashed back. A sweaty palm cupped the back of his head and he watched as his face was swiftly slammed down onto the bar. Blackness. When he finally came to, the first thing he felt was his tongue lapping up against a void where his two front teeth used to live. Unwillingly, salty tears had spilled out his eyes, stinging as they escaped down his swollen scraped cheeks.

'We should take a break.' Toni's hand quivered, feeling shock and disappointment in what had happened to him. She could feel perspiration droplets gathering on her palms and chest making them moist and clammy. Junior stalked out the room leaving the door swinging gently on its hinges.

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Junior raised a balled fist to the slightly open door, pausing before he knocked. It had become a habit he found himself stuck with lately, always pausing and wavering a little before entering Toni's office, feeling unusually comfortable. Their last session had been emotional, it had been the first time Junior had spoken about the incident and addressed what had happened. He felt naked sitting quietly in the encircling arms of Toni's sofa. Spring was creeping up on London, and the cool air was lapping into the office through the partially open window. The warm afternoon sun filtered steadily through the glass window pane warming the carpet and Junior's ankles. Toni coughed, leaning forward on her knees.

'How are you?'

'I feel okay today, Toni.'

'I'm going to ask you again, why are you attending these sessions?' She peered across the room at him blinking vigorously.

'Because ... I need to let go.' A deep breathe escaped his lungs as he exhaled a sigh. He had been mugged. The young man in the club had stolen from him; his pride, self-confidence, self-respect, all

stolen from him in the single utterance of that word and the smashing of his face on the bar. As teeth shattered against concrete, so had his view of himself, crashing to pieces on the floor around him, leaving him empty. Toni felt relief as she watched an array of emotions swim across Junior's face. She felt comfortable.

'Letting go is such a difficult thing to understand. Trying to let go is like trying not to think about something. You're just going to think about it even more. Letting go is less of an ending of one thing and more of an acceptance of how it has affected you. How you choose to shape your life around that is your decision. You may either let the hate and discrimination mould you into a bitter, angry, ugly, beast, or allow it to help you grow, strengthened by the anger, channeling it until you flourish into someone with purpose.' She trailed off, overcome by the satisfaction of finally being uninterrupted by her difficult client. Junior sat in silence watching as the afternoon sun cast shadows across Toni's face through the window.

Sitting in the front garden after returning from the dentist that morning Junior pulled at a rose bush. The taste of mouthwash lingered in his throat. His top lip hugged the two new teeth in his mouth, his tongue welcoming the feeling of something solid. Junior's ears pricked up as he sat, hands fumbling in the damp soil. The ground was tepid to the touch, and smelled comforting. Spring had finally raised its head, and the air was warm and still. A patter of feet echoed up the road as the elderly woman from next door toddled by. Junior raised a hand to her in greeting, parting his lips in a smile for the first time in almost a year. She smiled back, exposing the top of her dentures as they shied away from her gums, before disappearing into the neighbouring house.

The sound of an airplane hummed overhead. Stepping back, Junior admired the now budding healthy rose bushes, leafy and thriving. He felt pride inflating his chest. It was good. Tugging at handfuls of grass and gnarling weeds sprouting between the tiles, he tossed handfuls into the compost heap as he listened to the music drifting out from the back of the house.

‘Junior.’ His head snapped up at the sound of a familiar voice. Toni stood at the gate peering down at him. She had a headphone hanging from her left ear and a water bottle in hand. She felt impressed by what she saw.

‘Hi!’ Junior stumbled to his feet and opened the garden gate to her, watching as her bottom quivered with each step, trembling like the surface of disturbed water, as she brushed past him. Toni slowed catching his eye. Resting her hip on the fence she peeped down at the rose bushes.

‘Impressive,’ she said, smiling. He seemed so much more relaxed.

‘I thought it was time I looked after them. They were being attacked by weeds,’ he mused.

‘I want to say thank you,’ he murmured looking back at her. Her smile was warm and soft, reminding him of the way Mum used to smile at him.

Junior took a step closer so the tips of his muddy boots were almost touching Toni’s shoes. Squaring her in the face, he was taken aback by the surprise of finding a young man smiling triumphantly back at him through her brown hazy eyes.