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Per Capita

INDIAN RED. 2015.

THE FIRST MAN Kalo ever loved was a hustler—a killer, too. In that way she was blessed. He taught her two things (more, but this is what she will share): all you got in this life is your balls and your word; play your hand close to your chest. The city Kalo grew up in changes infinitely and infinitesimally by the square foot. Dead men, ghosts, babies, slave ships, the drums, and jewelry (who knows how they got it on board), all these things crowd the sidewalks and jam up all the doorways, which are filled with bullet holes.

ELI WHITNEY INVENTED THE COTTON GIN. 1967.

WHEN KALO'S DADDY was ten years old, Wharlest Jackson got a promotion in Natchez, Mississippi. And then some white men put a bomb under his car. Blew him to bits. Just like that. Then a white man shot Kalo's uncle in broad daylight for allegedly fucking his daughter when everybody knew Kalo's uncle didn't even like white girls. Plus, he was gay, but nobody knew that, or maybe they did. But Kalo never knew him because he died before she was born.

Kalo's grandma's daddy, Papa, used to pass for white. Town to town. He was a baker. He made all the fancy cakes and shit for weddings and birthdays and funerals all over Louisiana. When Papa's mother died, one very satisfied bride inquired with the postman on how to send a flower arrangement. He couldn't figure who she was talking about then it clicked. Oh you mean *those* Pochés, he grinned. Them *colored* people?

Flowers and a posse came. Kalo's Tante Mochine says the fire those men set is what made her grandma's face twist up with the palsy. However, there are still miracles. Just one year later, Kalo's grandma graduated from eighth grade and confirmed her soul at Our Lady of Grace with a straight face.

JAMESTOWN. 2015.

WE FREE, but still stuck in a slave mentality, or so they say, or who knows, until it's black history month, and why isn't there white history month anyway?

AUBADE. 1996.

KALO TAKES A SHORTCUT through an alleyway, so she can get to the bus stop faster. It is three buses to the high school she attends. When she leaves in the morning, the sun is never shining. Most of the year it is just barely dawn when Kalo walks out the door. It wasn't Kalo's idea to go to this school, or her parents' either, but when she took the test and won the money, they all buckled under other people's expectations. *Think how nice it would be for people to see a girl from The Gardens going to that school.* Mostly it was okay, or rather, she just dealt with it. Today, Kalo wasn't sure she'd make it all the way there. Today was a day when she might get off that second bus and just hang in the park.

Kalo's cousin was shot last night. He lived three doors down from her. Kalo hears the commotion when he is pulled out his doorway into the middle of the courtyard, banged up, and left there. When the shooting stopped a little kid knocked on Kalo's door and said Joseph had a hole in his head. Kalo thinks about all this and also how this English teacher of hers keeps giving her C's, no matter what she writes. As Kalo walks to the bus stop she stops to stare into the windows of several abandoned houses oddly enjoying the smell of rotten wood.

"K!"

Someone yells out from inside one of them. It's Corey. He and Kalo both grew up in The Gardens, but don't go to school together anymore. He'd been in the stinking house all night, probably would be there through the afternoon.

"I'm sorry. I heard about J," he says. "Stay and chill for a lil bit."

Kalo wants to. She tells him about a kind of poem where lovers part at dawn. Corey tells her that he loves her for the kinds of things she says to him. By now, the sun is just poking its head out a bit. In the infant light, Corey's red dreads and ruddy skin look like they are on fire. Kalo wants to stay, badly, but she has to go. Full of flame, Kalo runs the rest of the way to her stop and takes the bus all the way to school.

**MOST YOUNG KINGS GET THEIR HEADS CUT OFF.
2010.**

KALO NEEDED A JOB and it looked like the blond lady had one for her. The saccharine niceness of the white woman's voice and demeanor in the interview screamed *bitch* (probably racist bitch) in neon multi-colored lights. However, the negative balance Kalo had just checked overruled any other signs she could read at the moment.

"Do you have any experience in restaurant sales, event planning?" the blonde asked. "I'm Allison Fine, by the way."

Kalo had, so she showed her teeth and extended her hand.

"Kalo. And yes, I have five years' experience in timeshare sales, restaurant sales, and tourism."

Kalo had done that too.

Allison sat straight up, excited. "Then you must know 'Springtime in the Old South.' They bring so much money in. It's our most popular tour group that books with the restaurant."

"Do I?! Yes, they were real moneymakers in timeshare too."

"It's supposed to be a great tour. Maybe we can do that one together." Allison gave Kalo another saccharine smile that made Kalo want to slap her.

"Springtime in the Old South"—that sounded like a pretty fucking scary place, but since the white lady let it pretty much slip that she had gotten the job, Kalo laughed.

"Sure thing," Kalo answered. "That way we can check out the menus at the other restaurants the tour guides take them to."

"Perfect, I like you already." Allison patted her shoulder.

Kalo smiled again. This time it was a real one. They always think they're playing you.

WE WANT TO READ ABOUT OURSELVES. 1997.

"OH, I KNOW IT'S ONE of the three of you," says your high school English teacher.

It begins with mismatched papers in high school and it never stops. There will always be another school. Every time it happens, the clock restarts, and you forget you've been here before. Maybe you get mad, curse somebody out, fuck them up if the situation permits. Probably, you choke on it, not knowing what to say. You just hang out there,

hyper-visible, but apparently barely there. Searching for your humanity in the midst of the constant humiliation and adjudication of it.

“Oh, I know it’s one of the three of you,” says your high school English teacher.

You, Dana, and Angela, couldn’t look more different, but it was just as well that you all be triplets. And that never stops, or gets old, or easier. The erasing grates across your skin every time. But you know what?

Black doesn’t crack.

**NATIVES CARRYING SOME GUNS, BIBLES,
AMORITES ON SAFARI. 1982.**

WHITE PEOPLE are always showing Kalo pictures of mixed babies with such pride. Why? If they knew shit, they’d know she’s hard to please.

**NOBODY KNOWS YOU BETTER THAN YOUR
DEALER. 1998.**

KALO’S SOPHOMORE YEAR in high school her homeroom has a classroom Christmas Party. This is also the year: her name shortens from Kaloneeka to how she will be known from here on out. Mrs. Sharp decides Kalo will bring the “cocktail napkins.” *Cocktail napkins*, she repeats the phrase to herself.

“I can bring some too,” says another student.

“Okay, so that’s Todd and Kalo for the cocktail napkins,” Mrs. Sharp reiterated.

Kalo has no idea what they were talking about. She tries to play along. Were they special napkins only white people used? At lunchtime, Kalo looks up the words on the Internet in the library. Small and square and plain white-paper napkins, like Kalo’s seen and used all the time. Kalo decides then to try to know everything. Everything. All the shit they’ve never heard of. See, there is so much you have to learn to survive. Kalo spends her lifetime in recovery.

I’MA LET YOU FINISH, BUT BEYONCE’ . . . 2010.

WHEN ALLISON’S IN-VITRO failed for the third time, she cried in the office. It was just the two of them and she needed a tampon. Kalo looked up from her computer, Allison’s face red as the light from her

flickering flash drive. When she came back from the bathroom and sat down at her desk, Kalo held her hand for a second and told her she'd be okay. Kalo tried to resist the soundtrack that played in my mind. *You is kind, you is smart, you is important.* Allison had suggested that she read *The Help* awhile back. *All I need is a kerchief*, Kalo wrote in an email to herself. Kalo had buried a new lover and two friends in two months' time. No condolences necessary.

**DON'T MAKE ME HAVE TO GO IN YOUR
POCKET. 2010.**

"KALO, BEFORE YOU LEAVE in the evening, do you think you could empty the trash? I mean, there's really no reason for John to come back upstairs when..."

Allison stopped talking. She knew she had made a mistake. Like why send a nigger up the stairs when there was already one upstairs! Since when did being a sales manager not include custodial work?

"Oh, don't worry," Kalo said, never taking my eyes off her computer screen. "John will do anything for *me*."

Allison must have felt the edge of a straight razor in Kalo's voice, because she didn't need to look to feel Allison's eyes burning into her back, or to know that her face was bright red. It was Allison's dad's restaurant that they were marketing to the tour groups in the first place. Still, Allison would be hard-pressed for someone to tell her "Bless you" when she sneezed.

Look-up-jobs-on-craigslist, Kalo typed in her Outlook Task Manager.

Pretty black girls for white men. Upscale clientele. Kalo read silently to herself and laughed out loud. Allison slammed her pen down and stormed out for a cigarette. You damn right. Kalo laughed some more. I'd certainly fuck her husband for a check, before I cleaned up behind his wife, she thought. Who wants to fuck somebody that smells like bleach? That's what Kalo's grandpa said one day to her grandma. The meanest thing he ever said, she said.

SAMO FOR THE SO-CALLED AVANT GARDE. 1985.

"YOU ONLY NEED ONE color, one color, one color," Mrs. Spear repeated over and over, as she walked up and down the rows of seated kindergarteners.

They all sat in their matching uniforms, same houndstooth jumper or khaki trousers, same white socks, saddle oxfords, unstained and clean.

“These pictures will be hung from colorful strings in the breeze-way. Pictures of the Blessed Mother are our grade’s contribution to this year’s May Crowning. Please make them neat and beautiful.”

Mrs. Spear hummed the tune to “Hail, Holy Queen” and placed a crisp sheet of freshly mimeographed paper in front of each pupil. A purplish color outline of a Virgin Mary with slits for eyes stared back at them.

“Please pull your blue crayon from your package of eight crayons. Your crayons should be in order. Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, brown, and black. Black is always the last color. That’s an easy one to remember,” Mrs. Spear chuckled.

The children all stared back at her. She took them all into account. *Quite a few Vietnamese this time, and Kalo. Whatever you call that.*

“Okay, now we will carefully begin to color Mary’s gown blue. Everything else should be white.”

BOMB ON THE BUS: THE GHOST OF WHARLEST JACKSON. 1999.

THE FIRST MAN Kalo loved taught her to cock, aim, and shoot: a .38, a shotgun, and even a Desert Eagle. After these valuable life lessons, she graduated high school, and college was next. He gave her a warning. Nobody is gonna tell you what they expect. Everybody will lie to you. They will feed you a myth of excellence and then despise you for performing. Also: in addition to being handy with the steel, in order to go the university, you have to learn to read and write like a white man. You have to leave your head at home before entering the building. No one will say it outright, they will drive you crazy with denial, but take it with you and see what happens.

BOOM FOR REAL: RIVER ROAD. 1811.

IT ALL COMES DOWN to the drum, my grandma said. For whatever reason, out of all their mother’s colonies, they let us beat it here like we always did. So we did, and it does. And that’s exactly where they fucked up at.

NIGGERTOWN. 1492.

WHEN WHITE PEOPLE come, they change the names of places.

LATE WORK. 2010.

WHEN ALLISON FOUND out Kalo was a student, she couldn't decide whether to hate her more or less than she had before. *Lazy nigger. Uppity nigger.* Who could decide? Kalo wondered if Allison had ever considered that she might write about her one day.

NOLA. 2015.

THERE IS A LONG LINE in Royal Grinds. Ten people deep, all tourists, all ordering the fanciest, multiple-step-preparation coffee on the menu. All Kalo wants is a medium of whatever roast is ready now; she settles in for the wait. To draft proposals and come up with prices to put on tradition, book restaurant space, plan weddings, and show new waiters how to feed tourists (the old white people in Canada, or Kentucky, or Europeans, or Asians, or Arabs here to see what was left of the city) was exhausting work. A cup of coffee and a cigarette in the courtyard are a necessary and inextricable part of her morning routine.

While Kalo waits, she notices, next to the calcified pralines that the tourists still buy, the postcards on display. There is Ol' Man River Cane Syrup, ShoNuff Molasses, Old Mammy's Yams. The skin is black and our eyes are bright. Lips so red. Kalo is staring at the postcards so intently that Allison's hand on her shoulder nearly makes her jump out of her skin. Allison doesn't notice. Getting some caffeine in ya this morning, *girl?* Allison asks. Kalo cringes at her manager's folksy affectations, all up in her fifteen-minute hideaway.

There is a customer behind Kalo and in front of Allison in line. She is a typical tourist white lady in a straw hat and camera bag. She reaches over to the display and picks up a postcard that is advertising something edible by placing black men's faces at the center of sunflowers. Kalo wonders if she will buy it and why. Instead the woman does what all tourists do in the first six blocks of the Quarter, she turns to Allison and Kalo and asks a question. She expects answers to half a millennia of controversy plus directions. *Which direction is Jackson Brewery from here, and how do people feel about these kinds of postcards?*

Allison responds quickly and emphatically, which surprises Kalo. She has never previously known her to have much to articulate, besides the power of being the boss's daughter. *They are a part of our history*, Allison says. As you can see, this is all pretty retro, people collect them. It's a part of our history. Our history, no one takes offense. At that the tourist woman bristles, more quizzical than contrary. *Really?* she asks. They just seem so, so, *offensive*. Correct, Kalo interjects. Most people I know think they're racist, Kalo continues. The wait for this coffee has gone on too long. All Kalo wishes for now is a rock and shattered glass.

WE'VE READ THE CLASSICS TOO. 2012.

THE FIRST MAN Kalo ever loved used to draw pictures. Kalo made them stories by putting captions and sticking a few sentences underneath each one. People would be amazed at the places Kalo and her lover have been. White people are never friendlier than when they think you have coke. They can spot you anywhere. It's a look you never lose. Or maybe it's a look you were born with. In high school Kalo took a class called Humanities. A class designed to teach white kids to look smart at stuffy dinner parties. Kalo is actually pleased with that experience. That's why she always gets the references, can spot a fiend anywhere, give a wry chuckle, and indicate her knowing better than most.

GOOD MONEY IN SAVAGES: FROM 1811 WITH LOVE. 2013.

THE DAY Kalo handed in her resignation, Mr. Fine, Allison's father, couldn't decide if her "attitude" was "natural" or if he was sorry to see her go. Corey had taught Kalo well. They'd miss the sales she brought in. When is this effective? Mr. Fine asked. Today, she replied. Kalo's mouth a straight line. It's just going to end badly between me and Ally if I finish the two weeks. Kalo didn't try to stop the redness from coming to her face or her eyes. She was human, goddamnit. Kalo made note of the floor-to-ceiling map of Louisiana's plantations in 1853. Kalo shook Allison's dad's hand, told him she had learned a lot, and cleaned the hard drive on her computer before she left that place.

**MARK THEM WITH YOUR LIVING:
KING COTTON. 1996.**

BY THE TIME Kalo gets back home from school most evenings, it's already dark. Kalo walks mostly main streets, but this evening, she cuts back down the alleyway. Kalo wants to see if Corey is out. He is. Standing on a porch that is barely holding on to the house it's attached to. A yellow, black, and red bandanna holds his hair back, and his locks stick out around his head like a crown. He will be out here all night. Still here in the morning when Kalo is heading out to school again. Corey won't move off the spot till all of it is gone. Every last rock.

"You going home?" he asks.

"Yeah."

"Wait here a second. I'ma walk you back."

Corey comes back out the house with a freshly rolled cigar, sparks it. Kalo inhales deep, and exhales slow. Her knees disappear for a second. Kalo is struck with knowing that no one will ever know the story of The Garden the way they do. As she and Corey head to her house at the very edge of the neighborhood, Kalo tells him: No matter where it is, I want to go with you. Corey agrees to this plan and takes her hand. There is no way of knowing what is next for either of them. But they decide that they will go together. The path leading forward, toward power or fire — whichever came first.