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Christian Watson stifled a yawn as he sauntered through the doors of the large auditorium. The first lecture didn't start for about thirty minutes, but the room was already full of teachers, some seated, others walking around, socializing. He wondered who had come up with the idea to have a full-day lecture series in the middle of the summer. More than that, he wondered who had made it mandatory. He thought it was good that people were taking the time to focus on black students, but he wondered if thirty-six years of being black exempted him from having to spend the entire day listening to lectures. He'd expressed his feelings to his wife, a night before, and being the supportive spouse she was, she'd simply told him to suck it up and take some good notes because she, a teacher-turned-editor, wanted to hear what everyone was talking about.

He felt another yawn, and this time, he didn't try to stop it. At this rate, he was prone to fall asleep. His eighth graders didn't even have to listen to that much talking in one day, and listening to other people talk was one of their main duties as students. He thought back to his own years as a student, to the days he would amble into school with an expectation to leave, and remembered how he used to make it through the day by thinking about the things he was looking forward to—a track meet, the weekend, lunch. Today, he was looking forward to three 'o clock. Once the clock struck three, he'd be out of here. If everything worked out in his favor, he'd miss the brunt of rush hour, make it home a little before four, and probably be able to take a quick nap before he took his daughters to the park. He figured that if he thought about those things, he'd be able to overcome the excruciating boredom that was bound to take place at some point during the lectures. Then he made the mistake of glancing at the nearest clock. It was only quarter of nine.

He scanned the room in hopes of finding somewhere to sit. Securing a decent seat at these types of events was both an act of strategy and a game of chance. Terrible judgment

coupled with equally terrible timing could place him in the presence of the incessant cougher or the never-ending pen-clicker, the types of people nobody wanted to be stuck by for long periods of time. Ready to take a chance, he was about to take a seat somewhere in the middle of the auditorium but quickly changed his mind when he happened to notice a familiar face in the rear. Excusing himself, he pressed through the many people holding drinks and pastries that were supposedly prohibited in the recently renovated auditorium, making his way to last row in the room, where Tina Baker sat, eyes glued to her phone.

He and Tina had met a few years earlier at a leadership conference. They'd partnered up during a workshop—an incident that may or may not have been the result of the fact that they were the only two black people in the room. Since that day, they'd run into one another every now and then, sporadic occasions that made them feel like cousins meeting up at a family reunion.

As she noticed someone approaching from her peripheral, Tina quickly glanced up, already thinking of ways to fend off a potential creep, but quickly set her mind at ease when she saw who it was.

“Hey, stranger,” she greeted. “Long time no see.”

“Hey,” Christian made himself comfortable in the empty seat next to hers. “I see you're here to learn about the plight of black students too.”

“A learning experience,” Tina let her eyes travel back to her phone. “So that's what we're gonna call it, huh?”

She'd been teaching for twenty-two years, and over that course of time, she'd seen her share of events like this one. A bunch of highly educated people—most, if not all, of them white—would stand up with their extensive research and confidently prescribe the cure for some

issue about black students or black education. Tina had nothing against the people or their research, but it made her wonder. Not only was she a black teacher, but once upon a time, she'd also been a black student. She, along with the handful of other black teachers in the room, had experienced things that a majority of the speakers had only observed or read about, yet the speakers were the experts. It never ceased to amaze her that decades of experience seemed to always come second to scholarship. If that concept was applied to any other situation, it wouldn't make any sense. If someone had to get a root canal, who would be the best option for performing the procedure—the person who read a bunch of books about it or the person who'd actually done it more than a few times? Nobody ever considered the hairstylist who'd only watched a bunch of tutorials to be a professional, nor did they call the mechanic who'd observed other mechanics an expert. What made those in the world of education so different?

“I guess we'll know by the end of the day,” Christian replied. He glanced at Tina, who was completely focused on her phone, her thumbs moving pretty quickly for someone who wasn't a millennial. “Most people don't start texting until the speaker starts talking,” he joked. “It's nice that you're getting it out of the way now.”

Tina smirked but didn't look up. “I told my friend I would save her a seat,” she explained. “She said she's in the parking lot, so I'm letting her know where we are.”

“That's easy. Just let her know we're literally in the last row.” He looked around, noting that there were a few unclaimed seats scattered throughout the room, most of them closer to the front than where they were. He turned to Tina. “Any reason why we're in the Negro section, though? You trying to make a statement or something?”

Tina laughed and finally looked up from her phone. “I sat back here because it's easier to walk out if I have to answer a call or something. My kids are home alone, and my thirteen-year-

old is in charge. God forbid anything crazy happens, he's supposed to call my husband, but if he can't reach him, I'm next on the list. Not to mention," she shrugged, "the closer you are to the exit, the easier it is to beat the crowd come time for dismissal."

"Good thinking," Christian nodded. He watched Tina glance quickly at her phone. "Still waiting to hear from your friend?"

"Her last text said she was coming into the building, so she should be . . ." her sentence trailed off as she began scanning the room. After a moment, she stood and started waving.

Christian watched as, across the room, a young, black woman emerged from a group of people, waving back at Tina. Knowing where she was headed, she pressed through the throngs of people, occasionally disappearing behind a person or two.

"*She's* a teacher?" Christian asked as Tina sat back down. "She looks like a professional-looking college freshman."

"Second-year teacher," Tina clarified. "And she just so happens to have been blessed with some really good genes."

"She works with you?"

Tina shook her head. "She teaches high school." Before Christian could say something else, she quickly added, "Yes, she knows she can pass for a student, but don't let the looks fool you. She's way more mature than them."

"Hey," the woman greeted, slightly winded, as she placed her tote bag on the ground and settled into the other empty seat beside Tina. "Thanks for saving me a seat."

"No problem," Tina said. She proceeded to introduce Jewel to Christian, the catalyst for the seemingly inevitable conversation that teachers had when they first met. In a matter of

seconds, the two teachers managed to share where they worked and the subjects they taught, before struggling to find more relevant things to say.

“So,” Tina jumped in, sensing the awkward first-conversation lull that was beginning to take place, “how do you guys think this whole lecture thing is going to go?”

“Making the School a Better Place for African American Students,” Jewel quoted the title of the lecture series from memory.

“I’m hoping the lectures will be a little more interesting than the title,” Christian remarked with a yawn, his arms stretching over his head. “But who knows? We might learn some good stuff.”

“I can’t tell if you’re being serious or sarcastic,” Tina said.

Christian stretched again. “Neither can I.”

“Why is it always about the students?” Jewel randomly mused aloud. The thought had occurred a couple days before while she was watching a television show about doctors. During some type of training exercise, one of the doctors had complained about how everyone focused on the well-being of the patients, but nobody seemed to care about the well-being of those who took care of the patients. For a moment, the complaint had caused her to think about her job—the demands, the unrealistic expectations, the stress—and she wondered how the heck she was supposed to be a super hero when she needed saving herself.

Noticing that the other two teachers had gone silent, Jewel turned and found them gazing at her. Tina frowned, Christian looked confused. “What?” she asked innocently.

“Y-you do know you’re a teacher, right?” Christian asked slowly.

“Well, of course I know that. I know that it’s about the kids—and it should be—but what about us? Everyone talks about making the school better for black students, but what about the black teachers?”

“Well, go on,” Tina prompted. “*What* about us?”

Jewel thought about it. “Well, all teachers have issues they have to face, but black teachers, we have our own set of issues and problems simply because our skin’s darker. We may not have to enter through back doors or stuff like that, but some of the stuff we face can mess with the way we do our jobs. Given the type of responsibility our jobs require, I feel like it’s a big deal, but I don’t hear people giving lectures on it.” She bit her lip. “It’s kind of like that airplane scenario when the masks come down. You know how they tell you to get yourself situated before you try to help someone else?” The other two teachers nodded. “I think it’s the same for teaching. Like, how effective will our help be for the students if we’re still trying to deal with the issues on the teacher level?”

Before either one of them could reply, the piercing shriek of audio feedback halted every conversation in the room and sent all eyes looking at the middle-aged, suit-clad man on the stage attempting to adjust the podium’s microphone.

“I apologize for that, folks,” he said once the feedback died down. “But we are about to start, so if you could make your way to your seats, that would be great.”

With that being said, the hum of various conversations was slowly replaced by the dull thuds of auditorium chairs being opened and occupied.

“Good morning,” the man greeted once the room was silent.

“Good morning,” the auditorium rumbled in response.

“My name is Patrick Shoemaker, and I want to thank you all for joining us for our Making Schools a Better Place for African American Students lecture series. While our ultimate goal as teachers is to make the school a better place for all of our students, today we are taking the time to look specifically at our African American students. Given the heightened racial tensions that have manifested over the past few years, it has becoming increasingly important that we reexamine the steps we are taking to create learning environments that are conducive to the success of our African American students.”

Shoemaker paused as a light round of applause rang out.

“These lectures,” he continued once the claps died down, “will not talk about test scores and achievement. In fact, academics will not be our focal point. Instead, we are going to focus on something that has the potential to be overshadowed by academics—personhood. Rather than looking what they do or do not know, we are going to take the time to look at who they are. Today, you will be hearing from four of the greatest minds in education in the state. I have had the honor to listen to and meet all four of these individuals, and I must say, you all are in for a phenomenal treat. The first speaker of the day will be Dr. Paul Lovell.”

As Shoemaker launched into Dr. Lovell’s credentials, the audience began readying themselves to take notes. Jewel pulled a tablet from her tote; old-school, Tina flipped to a clean page in a large legal pad; having forgotten his notebook on the kitchen counter, Christian defaulted to the notepad app on his cellphone.

“Without further ado,” Shoemaker was finally finishing up, “I introduce to some and present to others, Dr. Paul Lovell.”

As a welcoming applause resounded throughout the room, Dr. Lovell replaced Shoemaker at the podium.

“Good morning, good morning,” he greeted the audience with a hearty smile. “It is an honor to be here, a privilege to speak to fellow educators seeking to make a difference.” He pressed a button on a little remote, and the title of his lecture appeared on the two large screens, both at the front of the auditorium, one on the left and the other on the right. “Today, I want to talk to you about learning to embrace diversity.” He gripped the edges of the podium as his eyes traveled the length of the auditorium. “As teachers of diverse students, our ability to welcome their differences will play a critical role in whether or not they succeed. When it comes to race, knowing our country’s history and current climate, we should wonder: as teachers, have we been a part of the problem, or have we been a part of the solution?”

As Dr. Lovell continued, he spoke with the fervor of someone who truly believed what he was saying. Tina believed his passion was real, and she truly appreciated seeing white people in the world of education who really did care about black students, but experience reminded her that she still needed to hear everything he had to say. Passionate speech was a powerful thing; it could make playing with boa constrictors sound like the key to mankind’s problems. That is why Tina had learned how to look past passion and pay attention to content.

“By a show of hands, how many of you have taught African American students?” Dr. Lovell asked.

Jewel watched as hands went up all over the room, including hers and those of Tina and Christian. If she was not mistaken, every hand was up. The sight provoked a thought that had plagued her as a college student but had been buried under all the concerns of post-collegiate life.

She leaned toward Tina. “You ever think about how a lot of teachers will have black students, but a lot of students won’t have black teachers?”

“Sure have,” Tina replied.

“What are we talking about?” Christian asked as he leaned toward Tina, eager-eyed.

Jewel leaned forward so she could see him clearly. “You ever think about how a lot of teachers will have black students, but a lot of students won’t have black teachers?”

“Of course,” he replied without hesitation. “I mean, we’re out here, but compared to white teachers,” he shrugged, “there aren’t that many of us. In fact, if you just look around, I don’t think it’s all that difficult to find a school with a greater percentage of black students than black teachers.”

“Yeah,” Jewel agreed. “At Manning, we have a lot of black students, but our teachers are mostly white.”

“Same at Carpenter,” Christian nodded. “If you include support staff, there’s like seventy people working, but less than ten of us are black.” He counted on his fingers just to make sure, his lips parted slightly as he mouthed the names of every black person he worked with. “Yeah,” he confirmed, “less than ten.”

The two teachers turned to Tina who, in an attempt to be somewhat respectful, had been trying to pay attention to Dr. Lovell.

“What’s it look like over at Greenleaf Elementary? What’s it like over in the city?” Christian asked, pulling her into the conversation.

“Well, you already know the majority of our students are black. You’ll find a white kid or a Hispanic kid here or there, but everyone else is black. As for teachers, I think there are a decent amount of us, given the population.”

“What about administration?” Jewel asked. “Is there ‘a decent amount of us’ there?”

Tina offered up a half-smile. “We have a black assistant principal. That’s it, though.”

“There may not be many of us as teachers,” Jewel began, “but I have to give Manning some credit. Our head principal is black, and we have two black administrators.”

“Whatever affirmative action move you guys had at Manning needs to happen at Carpenter,” Christian said, half-joking, half-serious. “There are none of us in administration.”

“Sheesh,” Jewel shook her head. “Is it because we’re not getting hired, or is it because we just aren’t going into the field? Like, what’s going on?”

Tina offered up a smile and sighed. “That’s a whole ‘nother issue in itself.” As much as she wanted to delve into the topic, she figured now was not the best time. She’d woken up early and had driven nearly forty-five minutes to attend this lecture series. She was going to take the time to hear something that was being said today.

With that in mind, she slowly turned her attention back to Dr. Lovell, a silent but kind message to Jewel that it was time to pay attention. The three teachers shifted their focus to the speaker just as he finished making a statement about schools with large populations of black, male students.

Christian had only caught the end of Dr. Lovell’s point, but that was all he needed hear. The way he saw it, for some reason or another, people seemed to notice when there were a whole lot of black students, but did they—students, parents, other teachers—ever stop and think about why there weren’t that many black teachers? More than that, did they notice that there weren’t many black, male teachers? Maybe he only noticed because he was a black male. Maybe he only noticed because he was a black male teacher. Maybe he noticed because he was the only black male teacher at his school.

As Dr. Lovell continued to speak, Jewel sat, fingers hovering over her tablet, waiting to type something. She felt like she was an undergrad sitting in class, trying to figure out what was

worth noting and what wasn't. She looked around the room. She wasn't really feeling the whole note-taking thing. What she really wanted to do was keep talking to Christian and Tina, to get insight from their years of experience. She still considered herself a novice in the world of teaching. She had a lot more to learn, and while her professors and mentor teachers had been superb, there were other things she needed to know, things that she could only learn from teachers who looked like her. Being in the presence of black teachers with a lot more experience than her was a golden opportunity, and she wasn't trying to miss it.

Dr. Lovell decided to use his last few minutes to answer audience members' questions. After five people asked different versions of the same question, his time was up. He thanked everyone for listening and made his way off the stage as the audience clapped. In a matter of seconds, Shoemaker was back behind the podium offering up a couple of claps himself, his smile professional.

Christian glanced at his phone, already knowing that only ninety minutes had passed but hoping that, somehow, it was one o' clock. Determined not to dwell on the fact that it was only ten-thirty, he looked past the numbers on his lock screen and focused on the picture of his wife and daughters in the background.

"Now that is how you start off a lecture series," Shoemaker said into the mic. "Thank you very much, Dr. Lovell, for that rousing lecture on the beauty of diversity." He spent the next few moments introducing the next speaker, a college professor at the state university who was currently working on her fourth book. "Please put your hands together and welcome Dr. Isabella Lopez."

As the audience launched into another welcoming applause, Shoemaker left the stage and a Hispanic woman made her way across the stage, the cord of her lapel mic trailing the length of her blouse and bouncing with each step.

“Good morning, everyone,” she said as she walked. Her voice and smile were kind, but her walk was that of someone who meant business. She came to a stop in the center of the stage. “I wish I’d gone before Dr. Lovell; he set the lecture bar a little high.”

Enough people chuckled.

“Today, I’d like to use our time together to talk about discrimination when it comes to our African American students. Specifically, I want us to be able to look at our schools’ policies and their effectiveness when it comes to preventing racial discrimination. From there, we’ll look at different instances of discrimination within schools, examine our classroom policies and see whether or not they promote discrimination, and ultimately come up with ways that we can make sure our schools are discrimination-free zones.”

People began to clap, something Dr. Lopez hadn’t been expecting. Her eyes momentarily widened in shock, but in a matter of seconds she was smiling again, patiently waiting for the applause to die down.

“Since I’m not a big talker,” she continued, “during our time together, there are going to be multiple opportunities for you all to have discussions with the people around you.” Heads turned side to side throughout the audience as the many teachers noted the familiar and unfamiliar people around them. “It is my hope that by the end of our time together, through listening, collaboration, and participation, this room will be full of people who are capable of identifying and preventing discrimination.” She walked to the podium and retrieved the little

remote that Dr. Lovell had used. She pressed a button and the screens at the front of the room displayed the beginning of a PowerPoint presentation. “Let’s begin.”

After giving the audience a working definition of discrimination and going over a few examples, Dr. Lopez gave them a few minutes to talk to the people around them for the sake of discussing the different policies and procedures in their school that helped to prevent racial discrimination.

“I don’t really know, to be honest,” Tina admitted as she looked back and forth between Jewel and Christian. “Are there specific policies for prevention?”

Christian leaned forward so he could see both Tina and Jewel. “I mean, there is the general do-not-discriminate policy that covers everybody.”

“At Manning,” Jewel began, “we had a protocol training thing.” She shrugged. “I think there’s more stuff put in place for after discrimination has happened, like filing grievances or reporting it to a designated teacher or someone like that.”

“Do you think there should be something more specific set in place for prevention?” Tina asked.

“I think . . .” Christian stroked his beard as he thought about it. “I think it’s so broad because people don’t know how to categorize everything for the sake of dealing with it. If you create a policy that tells everyone not to discriminate in a general sense, technically, all bases are covered. When you start getting specific, you’re probably gonna forget stuff, and nobody wants a lawsuit.”

“That makes sense,” Tina said before turning to Jewel. “The stuff you mentioned they put in place for dealing with discrimination after it happens, how well does it work?”

“Oh, I have no idea,” Jewel said quickly. “I’m only going into my second year, so I haven’t really had a chance to see anything. I haven’t really heard of anything happening either.”

“I guess that’s a good thing,” Tina said as she twirled her pen through her fingers. But then again, she thought, just because stuff isn’t known doesn’t mean it isn’t happening.

Dr. Lopez called the room back to attention. She talked a little more about policies before transitioning into talking about teachers’ ability to spot discrimination.

“For this next exercise, I am going to show you examples of different situations. It is up to you and those around you to decide whether or not racial discrimination is at play. If you do believe that discrimination is present, see if you know of any existing policies that could prevent it, or if you’re feeling brave, see if you can come up with a way to make the situation one in which discrimination is not present. You will have five minutes to discuss each situation. If you do not finish in time, do not fret; we are going to talk about all of them after you have had a chance to discuss them in your groups.” She clicked a button on the remote, and the two screens at the front of the room displayed a paragraph. With a simple nod, she said, “You many begin.”

“I’ll read it out loud,” Jewel volunteered. “Due to a district-wide budget cut, school sports programs have lost a lot of funding. In order to play sports, students have to pay a fee that will cover equipment, uniforms, and transportation—things that used to be paid for by the district. There are quite a few African American students who cannot afford to pay the fee, so they are not able to participate.” Jewel looked at the other two teachers, her eyes questioning. “Does this count as racial discrimination?”

“Hmm,” Christian bit his lip.

Tina stared quietly at the screens, her arms crossed. Jewel figured she was either rereading or thinking.

“Would it help if we knew how many not-black students couldn’t afford to play too?”

Jewel asked cautiously, the others’ silence making her a little uncomfortable.

“I don’t know,” Christian replied after a moment. “I mean, on the surface, it’s nothing more than a budget cut and everybody has to pay.”

“But if you start digging deep,” Tina began, “and start talking about systemic issues and all that stuff, someone could find a way to argue that it’s a system working against black kids.”

“Then how do you explain the black kids that *can* afford to play?” Christian posed.

“Better yet, what about the white kids that can’t afford to play?”

“What happens if numbers show that more black kids can’t afford to play than white kids?”

“It would be easier to argue discrimination, but what if that’s not the case? What if the numbers aren’t all that different?”

“So,” Jewel interjected, “is this just one of those screwed up situations that has no clear solution?”

“I’m gonna say it depends on who you ask.” Christian replied carefully. “Some will find a way to say it’s racial discrimination, and others will find a way to say that it isn’t.”

“If that’s the case, can’t you even argue it as some kind of SES discrimination or something like that?” Jewel asked.

“Which,” Tina came back into the conversation, “would take us back to the whole racial-discrimination argument. You two already know if you start talking about SES you’re going to end up back at race.”

“So it is racial discrimination?” Jewel had meant to state it, not question it.

“Umm,” Christian dragged the word out as he figured out what he was going to say. “Honestly, I still think it depends on who you ask. All you need is a handful of people with some good arguments, and this thing could go in a few different directions. Now, considering the fact that we’re at an event that’s focusing on black kids,” he offered up a knowing look, “I have a feeling that Dr. Lopez will focus on the racial-discrimination aspect.”

There were so many questions that Jewel wanted to ask— *If they were at some other event, would Dr. Lopez have connected the issues to race? If the teachers thought the scenarios had to do with racial discrimination, were they only thinking that way because it was the right answer? What would the situation be like if white kids couldn’t participate in sports? Didn’t they need more information about these scenarios before they could reach a decent conclusion? Is this situation even a good example?*—but before she could ask any of them, Dr. Lopez changed the slide on the screen and instructed the teachers to finish their thoughts so they could begin to focus on the next situation.

Four situations later, Dr. Lopez called everyone back to attention once more. She went through all of the situations and revealed that they were all examples of racial discrimination, a fact that, given the event, wasn’t very surprising. Under the notion that the teachers were now more capable of identifying racial discrimination, she began to talk about what it looked like in the classroom. As she paced the length of the stage, she encouraged the teachers to think about whether or not their classroom rules and disciplinary procedures discriminated against African American students. She gave the teachers a few examples before launching into a practical list of do’s and don’ts.

By the time Dr. Lopez reached the final minutes of her lecture, Tina was fighting to pay attention. Dr. Lopez was making interesting points, but when it came to the battle for her

attention, between Tina's growling stomach and Dr. Lopez's words, the former was winning. They were about ten minutes away from their lunch break, and from what Tina could see, a lot of the teachers were becoming restless. Heads kept turning in the direction of the clock on the wall; people started putting away their note-taking devices; and the screens of laptops that had yet to be put away no longer showcased copious notes but Google searches about the nearest food places. Tina found the sights both amusing and ironic. As teachers, it bugged them when their students became antsy before lunch, yet when placed in the same situation, they were just as bad, if not worse.

After Dr. Lopez finished speaking, Shoemaker took the stage once more to dismiss the teachers for their hour-long lunch break.

"So do you two know where we're going yet?" Tina asked as they walked through the lobby. Sometime toward the end of Dr. Lopez's lecture, the trio had decided that, since Tina was parked closest to the building, they'd carpool somewhere to get something to eat. What they hadn't decided on, however, was the location.

"Not really," Jewel replied as they filed out of the building and into the sweltering July heat.

"I just want food, to be honest," Christian said, tugging at his shirt, wondering who decided that long-sleeved button-downs were practical professional wear in ninety-degree weather.

They ended up at a Chick-fil-A about a mile away from the lecture site. Despite the fact that they arrived during the lunch rush, they managed to grab a booth in the corner of the restaurant. They ate in silence for the first few moments, their food the center of their attention.

"I have a question," Jewel suddenly announced.

Christian paused, his sandwich halfway to his lips. “During lunch break, though?” he whined the same way his students did when he gave them assignments to do over the weekend.

“And what is wrong with me learning during lunch break?” Jewel raised an arched eyebrow in mock challenge.

“I’ve never met a teacher who was anti-learning,” Tina instigated in jest. She smiled innocently as she reached for her drink.

Christian made a face. “I’m not anti-learning. It’s just—it’s lunch break. We do not learn during lunch break. We eat during lunch break. We let our brains relax during lunch break.” He hit the table matter-of-factly. “The word *break* is in there for a reason. If you don’t take a break during lunch break, you’re doing it wrong.”

“I’m not even gonna try to . . .” she didn’t attempt to finish the sentence as she turned to Jewel. “Go ahead and ask your question, Jewel.”

“Do you guys think your racial identity plays a role in how you teach?”

“Ab-so-lutely,” Tina replied as Christian nodded vigorously, his mouth full. “Personally, I think with us, part of our personality comes out when we teach.” She shrugged as she pierced her salad with her fork. “More than that, I think the mom in me comes out a lot when I teach. I tend to talk to my students the same way I talk to my kids.”

“Speaking of talking to kids,” Christian began, “I know I had to learn how to change the way I communicate. Around family and friends and, you know,” he gestured to Tina and Jewel sitting across from him, “people who come from similar cultural backgrounds or whatever, I can say things without having to worry about stuff being taken out of context or seen as offensive. As teachers, though, we got kids coming from all kinds of backgrounds, so I had to learn how to say things differently in order to communicate effectively.”

“Now, that’s not really an issue where I am.” Tina covered her mouth with her hand as she spoke. “For the most part, I look like all of the kids in my class, so I don’t really run into cultural issues like that.” She paused. “I feel like there’s more familiarity, and because of that, I can say certain things and have certain conversations that my colleagues can’t. I can reference the fact that we all look alike and use that as a way to motivate them to do better, to inspire and encourage them.”

“At times, it really can be an advantage having kids that look like you,” Christian said.

“It definitely can be,” Tina nodded. “Back when I first started teaching, I was at a school with a diverse student population, but even then, we had a decent amount of black kids. In that environment, I had the chance to see that my black students did tend to relate to me more, and at the same time, I may have been able to understand them a little more than my white coworkers, simply because we have this,” she held up the back of her free hand, “in common.”

Jewel sat quietly, hanging on every word that was being said. Throughout college, she’d learned a lot about teaching, and over the course of her life, she’d learned a lot about being black, but she’d never really had a chance to learn about the things that could happen when the two converged. Talking to Christian and Tina made her feel like she’d enrolled in Teaching While Black 101, and it was one of the most interesting unofficial classes she’d ever taken, so much so that she was considering pulling out her tablet to take notes.

“So, what about you, Jewel?” Christian asked suddenly, pulling Jewel out of student-mode. “You think your racial identity plays a role in how you teach?”

“I’ve only taught for a year,” Jewel replied as she nervously swirled a chicken strip in barbecue sauce, “but I think, even during that small amount of time, I’ve seen that it does. I teach U.S. History, so I get to cover slavery, the Reconstruction Amendments, and all that fun stuff.”

She bit into her chicken strip. “This year, we were able to talk about Civil Rights Movement for a little bit, and I feel like I may have taught—and will teach—it differently than my white counterparts. I mean, I’m not changing factual information or anything, but I feel as though while they’re going to cover the standard points, I might delve a little deeper into it because it has something to do with my life and my experiences. Granted, I wasn’t there for the Civil Rights Movement, but I’ve grown up around people who were, I live in the aftermath, and as a black person, I’ve seen and experienced its effects in a way that the white teachers haven’t.”

“Now, what about your students?” Tina asked.

“When it comes to my black students, I kinda feel the need to say certain relevant, life-things because they’re there. Like, when we talk about the Civil Rights Movement, I might quickly delve into how there was a time when black people didn’t have the opportunity to do X or go to Y, but now that the opportunities exist, they shouldn’t be taken for granted. I just think they need to be reminded of and know the significance of stuff like that because it pertains to them in some way, shape, or form.” She reached for a fry. “On the flip side, my school isn’t like Greenleaf; all my students aren’t black. When we hit certain topics, I feel like there are some things I can’t say because I have white students in the room. I don’t want them feeling bad or guilty about stuff that has happened when it comes to race relations and things of that nature. I also don’t want it to seem like I’m favoring one group over another, because that’s not what I’m trying to do. I’m just trying to teach and reinforce life-stuff that they hear at home.”

“It’s not your fault that some life lessons are general and others are more specific to certain groups of people,” Tina pointed out. “You just have to learn how to navigate through it.”

Christian nodded. “It is tough, though, simply because I think our race, ethnicity, and experiences affect the angles we use to approach things, you know—and that’s everybody. I

mean, I teach English, and you know literature isn't always straight-forward and obvious." He picked up his cup and started absentmindedly playing with his straw. "I have a lot of black kids, so I think, when we approach certain texts, it helps that I know—for lack of better terms—black people things as well as, well, white people things. I can make references to culture and events and people that they're familiar with and use that information to help them see what's going on in the text. It's kinda like what you," he looked at Tina, "said about being able to relate to the kids. I think knowing stuff that they know and being able to relate helps me teach them better."

"What about your students who aren't black?" Jewel asked.

"Honestly, I think because I try to be as authentic as possible, it kind of pushes my other students to want to relate to me. I mean, I feel like developing relationships with my students is one of my strengths, and once you develop a relationship with someone, you'll find things that help you relate to them and vice versa."

Reaching into her purse, Tina retrieved her phone. Noting the time, she soberly announced, "It's about time we start heading back."

Jewel frowned, disappointed, as she stuffed the last of her fries into her mouth and took the last few sips from her drink.

"What time is it?" Christian asked. He started gathering everyone's trash.

"Twelve forty-nine," Tina replied. "And we have, like, a three-minute ride, so we'll make it before one."

Christian stood up holding the tray full of trash. "If only they started at CP time," he sighed dreamily, "I'd have time for a milkshake."

Once the trio got back to the site, Jewel and Christian went right into the building while Tina stayed outside to check on her kids. Going right back to the same spot they were in earlier, Jewel and Christian settled into their seats, making sure to save a spot in between them for Tina.

“Aww man,” Christian groaned after they sat down. Sighing, he closed his eyes and let his head fall backward.

“What’s wrong?” Jewel asked, concerned.

“The itis,” he yawned. “I don’t think I’m gonna make it through the rest of this.”

“If we have to consciously sit through this, so do you.”

“As long as they don’t turn off the lights, I might have a chance.”

Tina slid into her seat just as Shoemaker started making his way to the stage.

“Is everything all right?” Jewel asked.

“The kids are alive and well, and the house is still standing,” Tina smiled. “Thanks for asking.” She glanced at Christian and noticed that he was staring straight ahead, his eyes at half-mast. She turned to Jewel. “What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s just fighting the itis.”

“Oh,” Tina nodded understandingly. “I know the feeling.”

“I hope everyone enjoyed their lunches,” Shoemaker’s voice reverberated throughout the room, a signal for all other conversations to cease. “Now that we all have some food in our systems, we should be nice and energized and ready to learn. To start off the second half of today’s lecture series, we have none other than Dr. Elizabeth Swenson.”

Once Shoemaker finished introducing the highly-educated, non-profit-founding, elementary-education professor, everyone began to clap.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Dr. Swenson greeted cheerfully as she walked across the stage, microphone in hand. Her buoyant smile and bouncing, auburn curls made her look like the embodiment of jollity or, in Jewel’s opinion, the beloved, stereotypical kindergarten teacher. “I hope you’ve all had a wonderful day so far.”

Determined to write down more than the main topic of the lecture or the speakers’ name this time around, Tina grabbed her legal pad.

“For the next hour and a half, we’re going to take the time to look at how our African American students may experience isolation in school, the many different effects of isolation, and how we, as teachers, can create learning environments that will not make our African American students feel isolated.” She walked to the podium to retrieve the little remote control everyone else had been using. “To ease ourselves into the topic of the hour, I would like us to start by watching a little video.” Looking out past the audience, she set her eyes on the small tech team, three college-age kids tucked into the back-left corner, surrounded by complicated-looking technical equipment.

Please don’t ask what I think you’re going to ask, Christian silently begged.

“Is it possible that we could turn off the lights for the duration of the video?” Dr. Swenson asked.

The tech team responded by flipping switches, darkening the room section by section. The room would have been pitch-black had it not been for the screens at the front of the auditorium and the many glowing devices that were supposedly being used to take notes.

The video was compilation of black students talking about instances in which they’d experienced isolation at school. As she listened to the students share their experiences, Jewel began to reflect on her own pre-college educational experiences.

“Did you experience isolation as a student?” she asked Tina.

“Because I was black?” Tina shook her head. “My school had a lot of us, so that wasn’t a problem.”

Jewel nodded before asking, “What about as a teacher?”

“As a teacher?” Tina repeated slowly. “That’s a good question.”

Instead of answering the question, however, she used her elbow to nudge a nodding-off Christian.

Startled, he sat up. “What’d I miss?” he asked, suddenly alert.

Tina gestured for Jewel to ask her question.

“Have you ever felt isolated as a teacher?”

“Isolated how?” he asked.

“*How?*” Jewel’s confusion was audible.

“Yeah, like,” he leaned forward and ran his hand over his beard, “I think you can be isolated in different ways. You can be socially isolated; you can be isolated because of your ideas; and you can probably even be isolated because of where you stand with pedagogy.”

“Oh,” Jewel blinked. “I was only thinking about social isolation, but since you brought up the others, have you ever experienced any of the three?”

“Social, yes,” he nodded, “but I think race is only one factor. Culture can play a role too—the music you listen to, the kind of food you eat, daily stuff like that. When you’re in a place where the culture of a particular group is dominant and that culture is different from yours, there are going to be things that you just can’t relate to, because of your experiences. As a black person in that situation, you’re probably either gonna assimilate, get defensive, be quiet, or just be who you are,” he ticked off each option on his fingers. “My goal is to just be me.” He

shrugged. “When I’m at work, if I don’t make the effort to be with others in social settings, most times, I’ll end up by myself.”

Jewel nodded as she considered her own experiences. “When it comes to pedagogy, I feel equal. Like, we all earned our degrees and that’s that. But when it comes to ideas and social stuff,” she shook her head. “Every once in a while, there are times when I feel like my ideas just aren’t taken as seriously as other people’s.”

“Now, when you say ‘other people’s,’” Christian pressed lightly.

Jewel smiled, knowing what he was suggesting. “Sometimes, it seems like people see me as black, and they end up taking the idea of a white teacher instead of mine. Thing is, I don’t think they realize that they’re picking the white teacher’s idea over mine.”

The lights came back on, and Dr. Swenson began to speak, but Jewel kept talking.

“Socially, I do feel isolation. I think a part of it has to do with my race, but I also think a part of it may come from my faith. So, not only am I black, but I also look at life differently than others.” She turned to Tina. “Do you ever experience isolation?”

“To be honest,” Tina began carefully, “not really. I mean, we’re in classrooms all day with kids; the nature of our jobs is kind of isolating in itself. But outside of that, I feel pretty included. I feel like I can just join a group of teachers—white teachers—and easily be included in the conversation.”

“What about ideas and pedagogy?” Jewel asked.

“I don’t really feel isolation in those either,” Tina answered. “Just talking to my white colleagues, we seem to be on the same page when it comes to certain things like student behavior or whatever. Then, with pedagogy, from what I’ve heard, I don’t think the way I teach my students is really different from what they do.”

Their discussion ceased long enough for them to hear Dr. Swenson make a statement that connected isolation and a students' sense of feeling valued.

“So, do you isolated folks feel valued as minority teachers?” Tina asked, looking back and forth between the Christian and Jewel.

“Valued by who, though?” Jewel asked. “Administration, other teachers, our students?”

“All of the above.”

“Okay,” Jewel turned to Christian, seeing if he wanted to answer first, but his slight nod let her know that she had the floor. “Well, I feel pretty valued by administration and my students, but when it comes to coworkers, not so much.”

“Why?” The question came from Christian.

“It's probably because most of the people I work with aren't black. I mean, out of the eight social studies teachers, I'm the only black one.”

“If I can jump in right there,” Christian glanced at Jewel who nodded her permission, “I think that, to an extent, the fact that I am the one black male can be a little beneficial. I feel like some of the teachers see me as someone who may understand the kids a little more. Then there's the fact that I'm a male. I think I have the ability to approach students differently than the female teachers, especially as a black male. So, yeah, I think I'm valued by my coworkers. Now, when it comes to students, I'm not all that sure. Since they're young, I don't know if they really understand or take the time to think about the value of having a black male as a teacher.” He paused as the audience erupted into a bout of laughter over something Dr. Swenson had said. “I think whatever value exists from administration is pretty much equal for all of the teachers, so I can't really say being a minority or something like that plays a role.”

The two teachers turned to Tina. “Well,” she began, “at Greenleaf, I’ve never experienced anything that would make me feel any less valued than anyone else. I think my principal sees that we do our jobs, and he appreciates what we do. As for my students, it’s kind of funny. I have the ones who will beg me not to leave and talk about how they missed me when I’m gone, but when I’m there, they wanna act in a way that says the opposite.” She laughed. “But I think in the back of their little fourth-grade minds, they value me.”

“How about your coworkers?” Jewel asked.

“I guess they value me, and I say that because, like I said, teaching is isolating by nature. Our actual jobs require us to act solo throughout the day, so they do their things and I do mine. If they value me, it’s not really something I notice. I mean, at the end of the day, my students are my main concern so, you know, what other people think or feel about me isn’t as big of a deal.”

“Do you guys think white teachers ever consider whether or not they’re valued?” Jewel asked, her eyes roaming over the backs of teachers’ heads.

After taking a moment to think, Tina answered. “I think everyone wants to be valued to some extent. So, yeah, I do think they consider whether or not they’re valued, but unless they’re in a place where they’re actually the minority,” she shook her head quickly, “I don’t think they think about it in terms of race. I mean, they don’t really have to because, in a way, they’re the norm. So, I have a feeling they’re not like, ‘As a white teacher, do people value me?’ In that situation, I think they see themselves as just teachers, period.”

Jewel chuckled dryly. “If you ask me, at the end of the day, I’m just a teacher too.” The way she saw it, if someone asked her what she did for a living, she wouldn’t say that she was a black teacher. She’d simply tell them that she was a teacher.

“Yeah,” Tina agreed. “We are just regular teachers. Thing is, we just happen to be black, and that’s what makes it . . .” she struggled to find a good adjective, “tricky.”

“Let’s be real,” Christian jumped in. “There are way more white teachers than there are black teachers, so right off the bat, the fact that we’re black makes us different than, I guess, the common teacher, you know, the white teacher. So even though we’re just regular teachers, we’re not just regular teachers. Because of society and America’s history, I think that, somehow, our blackness is always going to be relevant, in both good ways and bad ways.”

“Black excellence on one hand, black stereotypes on the other,” Tina murmured.

“Is it safe to say that it’s harder for black teachers?” Jewel didn’t wait for a reply. “It’s like, the expectation is higher, but the support isn’t all there. That’s probably why there aren’t that many of us in the field. It’s already a hard job, but when you add the fact that you’re a minority and you will probably be a minority at your school, it gets even more difficult.”

“Next year’s lecture series ought to be about black teachers,” Christian proposed. “I can just see it now,” he made an invisible banner in the air with his hands, “‘When Teaching and Abundant Melanin Collide.’”

Tina snickered. “The subtitle would be, ‘You Don’t Know Our Stories, So Stop Acting like You Do.’”

“Yeah, yeah,” Christian nodded, agreeing between chuckles. “And the lectures would be, like, ‘Yeah, My Hair Can ‘Fro, But I Still Teach like a Pro’ and ‘Whatchu Mean *You People?*’”

“And all of the lecturers would be white,” Jewel added with a clever grin.

Despite their best efforts not to, the trio erupted into a fit of laughter loud enough to cause some of the people a few rows up to turn around, curious.

“It’s amazing how something so jacked up could be so funny,” Tina said as she caught her breath. She wiped at a stray tear rolling down her cheek.

“Being black,” Christian slouched in his chair and smiled, “sometimes the best option is to sit back and laugh.”

For the rest of Dr. Swenson’s lecture, the three teachers sat quietly, attempting to pay attention. The way Christian saw it, Dr. Swenson wasn’t a bad speaker; she had a happiness about her that made her sound like someone worth listening to. The thing was, he felt like he was sitting in one of those classes where the students either already knew most of the stuff the professor was going to teach, or the stuff was so common-sense that nobody could understand why someone felt the need to create a class for the material.

To an extent, Jewel felt bad about not paying attention during the entire lecture. She cared about her students’ well-being, but even the most caring teacher could only sit through so many hours of talking. Besides, looking around, she could easily see that a handful of people weren’t paying attention. Bent heads were one indication, but laptop screens showcasing Facebook profiles and email inboxes were dead giveaways. If anything, Jewel figured that people’s failure to pay attention was evidence that the lecture series was a classic example of good intentions carried out in a bad manner.

By the time Dr. Swenson finished her last point, Tina had managed to jot down a few notes alongside the extensive grocery list she’d made; Jewel had created a noteworthy collage of boredom selfies; and Christian had gone back and forth with his wife, via text, in a vain attempt to figure out what they were going to get for dinner.

“Three down, one more to go,” Christian announced as Dr. Swenson thanked everyone for listening and the audience began to clap. Her smile still bright, she exited the stage, passing Shoemaker as he came up to take his momentary place behind the podium.

“Thank you, Dr. Swenson, for that informative lecture,” Shoemaker nodded in the woman’s direction. He turned to the audience. “Wasn’t that a great way to start off the second half of our lecture series?”

Predictably, the audience clapped in response.

“Believe it or not,” Shoemaker began once the noise died down, “we’ve reached our final speaker for the day.” He proceeded to give a brief introduction.

Jewel turned to the other two teachers. “I’m just wondering, but did either of you happen to actually learn something new or, well, helpful today?”

“Other than the fact that you shouldn’t make people sit through this much talking in one day?” Christian asked, voicing Jewel’s sentiments. He shook his head. “Nah.”

“. . .so please welcome Dr. Monique Wallace,” Shoemaker finished his introduction.

The audience began to clap, and the trio watched as a young-ish-looking black woman began walking toward the steps that led to stage.

“Um, this is going probably going to sound really bad and all,” Jewel began, her eyes trained on Dr. Wallace, “but I kinda wasn’t expecting to see one of us speaking today.”

“You and me both,” Tina admitted as she watched Dr. Wallace climb the steps, a manila folder in hand. “I wonder who decided it would be a good idea to let a black person talk about black children.”

“Probably the same person who thought it not robbery to put a bunch of us in high positions over at Manning,” Christian smirked. “I’m not mad, though.”

“Well, good afternoon, everyone,” Dr. Wallace greeted as she placed the folder on the podium. “I’m thankful for the opportunity to not only hear but also share some things with you all.” Grabbing the remote control everyone else had used, she took a few steps away from the podium. “Now, if I can be honest,” she scanned the room as she spoke, “you’ve been listening to people talk all day. Something tells me that the last thing you want to do is sit through ninety minutes of me speaking.” She made a face that provoked a few laughs. “Under that notion, I was hoping that it would be all right if I sped this up a little, cover all the salient points, and let you enjoy rest of your day. Is that all right?”

The audience erupted into the liveliest applause they’d given since the lectures had begun that morning. There were even a couple of cheers.

“That’s what I thought,” Dr. Wallace chuckled. “So, let’s get started and see how this goes.” She pressed a button on the remote before quickly glancing over her shoulder to make sure the screens were showing the correct slide. Satisfied with what she saw, she turned her attention back to the audience. “During our time together, I would like to talk about microaggressions . . .”

“Micro-whats?” Jewel turned to Tina simply who shook her head and shrugged.

“. . .their effects on school environments, and the steps we can take to minimize them.” Dr. Wallace pressed a button on the remote control. “Just to put us all on the same page,” she read from the screen, “microaggressions can be defined as ‘everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership’” (Woodford et al. 418).

“So they actually have a name,” Jewel considered aloud. She felt the same way she had when she found out that the little plastic tubes at the end of shoe laces were called aglets. She’d known they’d existed, but she hadn’t known that they had an actual name.

“All this time, I’ve just thought of them as things people say and do that annoy the mess out of black people,” Tina admitted.

“As educators, it is imperative that we know how to identify microaggressions,” Dr. Wallace told the audience, “the ones we see carried out by others and the ones we may be guilty of carrying out ourselves. In regard to our African American students, it is crucial that we recognize the microaggressions they face and recognize how those microaggressions affect their educational experiences.”

Christian turned to the two ladies. “Maybe I’m wrong, but I think it’s easier to notice microaggressions and stuff like that when you’re a part of the group that’s on the receiving end.”

“Yeah,” Jewel nodded. “When it comes to the black students, I feel like I may see things simply because I’m black too.”

“Things like what?” Tina asked.

Jewel took a moment to think. “Well, I mean, there are times when I’m sitting in meetings, and teachers will be complaining about students doing certain things. Now, like, they may not come out and say it, but for some things, it’s obvious who they’re talking about. One thing I hear is teachers complaining about girls coming into school with non-religious head wraps.” She made a *well-duh* face. “Of course they’re talking about the black girls.”

“That’s one of the things we do,” Christian laughed. “But for real, is it that bad if they just walk in with them? I mean, hair can be really difficult at times, especially when it’s natural. Working with it is mad time-consuming, and the last thing you want to do is expose it to

humidity and rain and stuff like that.” He shrugged. “When the girls are walking from wherever to the inside of the school, the wraps are just their way of keeping their hair protected.”

Jewel eyed Christian skeptically. “You know a little something about hair, huh?”

“I have a wife and three daughters,” he replied, thinking about the times he’d done his daughters’ hair—the products, the hours, his hurting back. “It comes with the territory.”

“Makes sense,” Jewel nodded. “But like I was saying, the teachers, they do subtle stuff like that, and it’s just small crap like that that you have to deal with.”

“I know what you mean about that subtle stuff,” Tina said, her voice laced with mix of understanding, experience, and tiredness, making her sound more like a mom than fellow laborer. “Throughout my years in the classroom, I’ve seen white teachers who don’t know what it’s like to live a life of lack fail to understand students who come from that background, and I find myself having to play advocate. I’ll hear teachers casting stones at parents—‘The parents never show up’ and ‘They’re not concerned about how their kid is doing’—and I find myself having to play advocate.” She gestured to Christian. “Earlier, you were talking about how experiences play a role in how we approach content, and well, I think the same is true for how we approach other things on the job. You know, I know what it’s like to grow up in a single-parent home. I know what it’s like not to have this or that. My mom worked two jobs and had crazy hours, so she couldn’t make it to meetings and school events like that. Now, from the teacher point-of-view, it might’ve looked like she didn’t care, but the fact that she couldn’t make it to all those events showed how much she did care.”

“Mmm,” Christian grunted his agreement.

“She worked those long hours so my sister and I could go to school with food in our stomachs and clothes on our backs. She worked to make sure that we had the lights on to get our

homework done, a roof over our heads so we could get a good night's sleep. Because I had that experience, when the issue comes up, I find myself having to step in and remind the other teachers that the parents might really be doing the best they can. Like, maybe they don't show up to stuff because they're at work. Maybe they don't show up to stuff because they don't have a car. Maybe they can't afford to put gas in the car." She took a breath. "Do I think there are parents out there who don't give a flying flip? Yeah, but at the same time, I believe with all my heart that there are way more parents out there who truly care and are doing their best, and when that's the case, I think we need to recognize that and offer support in any way possible.

"Now, I'm not mad at the white teachers for not being able to understand—last time I checked, none of us asked for the situations we were born into, you know? No matter who you are, you can't help it if you were born with much or born with little. Personally, I thank the Lord for the experiences I had because they are the very things that help me help my students. Because of what I know firsthand, I can default to a perspective that many of my coworkers can't. I'm grateful that I get to play the role that I play, but it wouldn't be all that bad if the other teachers could—I don't know—realize that everybody isn't in the same position as them."

"It's crazy, though, because you got the teachers you just mentioned," Christian began, "and then you got the teachers on the flipside—the ones that wanna help way too much or the ones who are genuine but think they're rescuing the black kids."

"Rescuing," Jewel snorted. "Because all black kids need to be saved from poverty and drugs and gangs, right?"

"And that's the thing," Christian leaned forward, his movements animated. "They get a negative conception about black kids, and they go run with it, like, 'Oh, all black kids need' blah blah blah." He rolled his eyes. "That mess is annoying, man. Like, *all* of them are not in the same

predicaments. *All* of them don't need—I don't know—free and reduced lunch or whatever. I know they want to meet kids' needs and stuff, but you can't just take an idea about black kids and write them all off as needy. Carpenter Middle is in a pretty decent area, but the way the lines are drawn up, we got a good mix of kids from poor backgrounds and kids from more well-to-do backgrounds. You walk through the hallways and you see some black kids, look at the ways they behave, and you might assume that they come from the hood or whatever, but in reality, they're the ones living in the nice neighborhoods with the big houses. Meanwhile, you got the white kids who you assume are well-off, but they're not.

“I get that those teachers want to meet students' needs and all, but you can't just assume crap. Yeah, they want to help the black kids, but even when there is a need, I still don't think they get the fact that equality and equity aren't the same things. At the end of the day, how are you really going to know who needs what when you see your students in light of subconscious biases and negative generalizations?” He didn't give them time to answer. “The way I see it, you need to know who you're working with and what their situation is before you go trying to help. If you don't, you're either going to end up failing to meet a need or offending somebody by trying meet a need that doesn't even exist. I mean, as a parent, I know I'd be ready to go off if I found out teachers were trying to say my girls need this or that just because they're black or they dress or do things a certain way.”

“You and me both,” Tina said. “The only time my kids have ever gone to bed hungry is when they chose not to eat, and the only time they had to sit in the dark was when there was a power outage or they were too lazy to get their behinds up and flip the light switch. My kids and other black kids who don't come from the same background may have a lot of cultural stuff in

common—listen to the same kinds of music, like the same kinds of fashion, use the same slang, understand a lot of the same things—but that doesn't mean they come from the same situations.”

Tina's words reminded Jewel of a conversation she'd had a few years ago with her cousin Cory. Seeing that he was that one relative who nobody took seriously because most of the things that came out of his mouth were stupid, Jewel had initially taken his words with a few grains of salt.

“Us black folk, we're a complex people,” he'd told her with great confidence. “We got a spectrum. On one side, you got the light-brights, and on the other, you got the ones who disappear when you turn off the lights.” At that, she'd rolled her eyes, but an eye-roll hadn't been enough to deter Cory. “Now, just like our looks have a spectrum, so do our experiences. On one end, you got the *Boyz n the Hood*- and *Menace II Society*-type lives, and on the other side, you got *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* kind of lives. Yep,” he'd beamed with pride. “We are one complex people.”

As she sat listening to Tina and Christian, she realized that Cory's words were pretty true, even if they did employ TV shows and movies to make a point.

“That just goes to show, you can't take everything at face value.” Christian leaned back, arms crossed. “I feel like the kids understand that better than the teachers do, though.”

“So we can agree that there are definitely microaggressions towards the kids,” Jewel said, “but do you two ever experience anything personally?”

Tina, who had started fiddling with her phone, looked up to find both Jewel and Christian looking at her, expecting her to speak. “Oh, well, um, to be honest, I can't really say I've experienced anything,” she quickly added, “that I've noticed, that is.”

“For real?” Jewel hoped her tone hadn't revealed her shock.

“I’ve had a problem here or there with colleagues, but I’d like to think that they were the result of their personal issues and not my race.” She made a face that caused the other two to smile. “But I can’t really say that I’ve experienced anything like that simply because I’m black.” She looked back and forth between the other two teachers. “Now, I have a feeling you two have something to share.”

“Ladies first,” Christian turned to Jewel.

“All right,” Jewel slid to the edge of her seat, ready to share. “For one, I’m sick of people thinking they can just ask me stuff or say stuff because I’m black.”

“Stuff like . . .” Tina pushed.

Jewel paused to think of a good example. “One day, two girls got into a fight, and there was weave on the floor afterward. So, I had white colleagues coming to me and asking how weave works. I don’t know anything about it because I’ve never had it in before. All this,” she pointed to her hair, a vast collection of lengthy two-strand twists neatly falling around her face, “is mine. Throughout the year, I change it up, and when I straighten it, it’s pretty long. But like I said, it’s all mine. I don’t know anything about sew-ins or tracks and stuff like that, but people see that I’m black and automatically think I know how that stuff works.”

From what Jewel could see, her colleagues’ questions were honest and birthed from a place of true curiosity, but their genuine desire to know the answers didn’t excuse the fact that they were assuming that Jewel’s blackness made her knowledgeable on all things black. In her mind, that’s what search engines were for.

“I know what you mean,” Christian chimed in. “We were doing a poetry unit, and one of my coworkers wanted to use rap lyrics to help students understand literary devices. She asked me who had better lyrics, Kendrick or Kanye, and when I told her I didn’t know, she figured I was

having a hard time picking between the two.” He smirked at the memory. “I prefer my lyrics sung. I like a harmony and a dope run every now and then, but I’m not into rap like that. Like, you can’t assume that every black person listens to rap. That’s like me walking up to a random white person and asking them about screamo.”

“Oh,” Jewel said as she remembered another incident. “The week before Memorial Day, a bunch of the teachers were talking about going to the beach and staying at beach houses and stuff. One of my coworkers asked if I was going to the beach, and when I said no, she got to talking about how it’s okay because there are cheaper options and if I save up I could find a decent place next year. I just looked at her like, *are you for real right now?*” Her voice started to get a little louder. “It just so happens that I don’t like the beach like that. Lying on some sand in the sun doesn’t do anything for me and neither does playing in salty water. In fact,” she got a little louder, “I could think of plenty of other things I’d rather do than go to the beach. But if I actually wanted to go to the beach, best believe, I could go to the beach!”

At Jewel’s outburst, people turned around and eyed the trio, some with looks of concern and others with disapproving glares.

Embarrassed, Jewel attempted to play it off by staring straight ahead and offering brief nods as though she was paying close attention to the lecture and agreeing with Dr. Wallace. Christian leaned forward, faking a minor coughing fit, and Tina, pretending to come to his aid, placed her hand on his back. After a second, she turned to the onlookers, her face decorated with what she hoped looked like relief, and mouthed “He’s okay.” Whether the people fell for the scene or not, Tina didn’t know, but one by one, heads starting turning back toward the stage until all eyes were back on Dr. Wallace.

“Sorry about that,” Jewel apologized, her voice just above a whisper.

“It’s okay. It happens,” Tina assured her.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it. You’re fine,” Christian affirmed. “Now what were you saying before you started yelling?”

“What I was saying is,” she made a face at Christian. “I didn’t like how she just automatically started talking about money when I said I wasn’t going to the beach. I mean, I wasn’t the only one in the room who wasn’t going to spend the weekend at the beach, yet *I’m* the one who got the money talk. It’s just—stuff like that. . .” she let a sigh make up for the words she couldn’t seem to find. “Yeah, I’m black, but that doesn’t mean my finances aren’t straight, you know? Like, my blackness doesn’t automatically mean I belong in this category or that I know a bunch of stuff about X, Y, and Z.”

Tina and Christian nodded, their empathy voiced in their momentary silence.

Christian began to ruminate on their experiences—the questions, the assumptions, the labeling. They seemed to come with being black, like a buy-one-get-one-free kind of deal. The microaggressions were so normal and so easy to link to race that, at times, he found himself in a state of mental disarray trying to figure out if things that happened were truly because he was black or if they were simply the result of something else.

“This is kind of random,” he broke the silence, “or maybe it isn’t, but when stuff happens, do you ever find yourself trying to figure out whether it happened because you’re black or because of something else?” He looked at Jewel. “Like those ideas you were talking about, the ones that don’t get picked? How do you know they’re not getting picked because they feel you’re still young and new and inexperienced? Better yet, what if your ideas just happen to suck?”

Before she could speak, he quickly raised his hands as an act of innocence and added, “I’m not

saying they suck or anything. I'm just making a point. And you," he turned his attention to Tina, "what if your occasional beef with coworkers really is because you're black?"

"Well," Tina began slowly. "I think being black and living in the society we live in, when stuff happens, there's always going to be a chance that race is a factor. That doesn't mean that it will always be the cause, but the option will always be there."

"And that's the frustrating part because, like, you never really know," Jewel jumped in. "Even when good things happen on the job, there's still a possibility that it has to do with race. It's like, did I get hired because I'm qualified and I'll make a good addition to the staff, or did they just hire me because there's some kind of quota and they need more black people to make the school look diverse?" She played with the button on her sleeve. "I'd like to be able to celebrate accomplishments without having those thoughts in the background."

"Yeah," Christian agreed. "Then, on the other hand, let's say something bad happens, like you get a bad evaluation or something like that. Then you're left wondering, 'Was I really that bad?' or 'Is it because I'm black and the standard's higher for me?'" He ran his hand over his head. "Stuff like that'll drive you crazy if you let it." Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Tina smiling at something on her phone. "So you find my pain funny, huh, Tina?" he joked.

She looked up, her face still graced by the joy that had come with whatever she'd seen on the phone. "It's my kids," she explained. "They wanted to know if we could get pizza tonight, and I told them I'd think about it. Here's how they responded."

She held her phone so the other two teachers could see the screen. It showed an ussie of her kids. The two boys and two girls had grouped together on what looked like the couch, their similar yet different faces practically touching in an attempt to fit everyone in the picture. Their smiles, two clad with braces, one missing front teeth, and one boasting of incoming adult teeth,

were wide, and their big, brown eyes were filled with youthful glee. It was the type of picture that parents set as the wallpaper on their phones, the type of picture that both warmed their hearts and made them yearn to be in the presence of their kids.

“Aww,” Jewel gushed. “I don’t know how you could say no to those faces.”

Tina beamed as she gazed at four of the reasons why she worked so hard. Despite the fact that they were getting older with each passing day, they were still her babies, and like any good parent, she wanted what was best for them. She thought about their joyous smiles and wondered how many times they’d be turned upside down as her kids navigated a world where their skin color would nominate them for experiences she only hoped they could avoid. She felt like she had that thought in common with most, if not all, black parents across the country. From the classroom to the workplace, there was a chance that their babies’ unique personalities, gifts, quirks, intellectual abilities, and interests would always be overshadowed by their color. It was disconcerting and frustrating, but most of all, it was the norm.

Christian looked at the picture and couldn’t help but think about his girls. There were so many labels out there waiting to define them. If they walked outside with a head wrap, they’d be ghetto. If someone made them upset and they actually showed how they really felt, they’d be angry black females. If they were the only black people in the room, they’d be the authorities on all things pertaining to black people. There were so many labels and presumptions out there, not just for his girls, but for every black person across the states. He hated having people think they knew him because of some label. He wanted to be known by who he actually was, not by statistics, generalizations, or stereotypes brought on by the color of his skin, and he was sure he wasn’t the only person who felt that way. Looking at the picture, he thought about all the black people who’d be wrongly identified by labels, but what hit home was the knowledge that, to

more than a few people, his black daughters would be perceived as a bunch of different things before people took the time to know them as Nyla, Kennedy, and Amina Watson.

Jewel let her mind flirt with the idea of having her own kids one day before she began to imagine all the black students she'd teach in the future. She could picture them in her head—countless kids who had many differences but shared the ability to fill in the African American/Black bubble on forms. At this point in time, they were absolute strangers, but that didn't stop her from thinking about them. She thought about the ways she could influence their lives. She thought about the people they'd grow up to be. In all her thinking, she hoped for the best, but she couldn't help but wonder if ten, twenty, thirty years from now, they'd be sitting in the back of some auditorium venting about the same exact issues as those who had come before them.

“Thank you,” Dr. Wallace said as she grabbed her folder and turned to leave the stage.

The audience began to clap, and the trio, pulled out of their own thoughts, looked at one another, baffled.

“I know you stereotypical Negroes didn't just talk through her entire lecture,” Christian accused the ladies in jest.

“Couldn't have done it without you,” Tina quipped.

In a matter of seconds, the applause died down, and Shoemaker was back behind the podium, smiling.

“Thank you, Dr. Wallace, for that enlightening lecture and for reminding us that the quality of our information isn't necessarily contingent on the time we use to present it—a great takeaway for us educators.” He turned his attention to the audience. “Were you all enlightened?”

As expected, the audience clapped.

“Good, good,” Shoemaker nodded. “It brings me both great pleasure and sorrow to announce that we have reached the conclusion of today’s wonderful lecture series, but before we conclude entirely, we must thank the many people who made this learning experience possible.” He gestured to the lecturers, who all sat in the front row of the auditorium. “Thank you, Dr. Paul Lovell, Dr. Isabella Lopez, Dr. Nora Swenson, and Dr. Monique Wallace, for your amazing lectures.”

The audience applauded as the lecturers offered up humble, event-appropriate smiles and nods.

“To the many people who played a role in making this lecture series possible, thank you.”

The audience continued to clap as many of the teachers began to gather their belongings, anticipating the moment Shoemaker would give the official dismissal.

“Last but not least, thank you all for coming out and taking the time to look into the experiences of a group of individuals who deserve our attention and concern just as much as the next group of people. It is my hope that the things you learned today will help you to become even greater educators, and at the most basic level, greater people. Once again, thank you, and enjoy the rest of your day.”

In a matter of seconds, the auditorium’s atmosphere livened as hundreds of teachers acted on their newly-given freedom. Some made their way out of the room, not looking back. Others gathered in groups, laptop bags and colorful totes draped over their shoulders, their conversations a million miles away from the topic of the day.

“Well, it’s over,” Jewel announced the obvious, all the while wondering why those words, the same words she’d been waiting to say all day, did not make her as happy as she thought they would.

“We made it through,” Tina said matter-of-factly.

“Yup,” Christian breathed.

Unlike the rest of the room, the trio had yet to move from their seats. Instead, they watched as all the other teachers laughed and talked and transitioned out of serious mode. The trio wanted to do the same, but at the moment, they couldn't. Although neither of them said it out loud, they knew that they were all thinking about the picture they'd seen minutes earlier. For them, it was more than just a nice picture of black kids. It was a mirror that showed them glimpses of their own childhoods—childhoods so different yet so similar. If they took a picture of themselves and showed it to the kids, they had a feeling that the kids would see glimpses of their own futures—futures so different yet so similar. With this in mind, the three teachers couldn't help but sit and take a moment to think. They had a feeling that melanin wasn't the only thing the younger generation inherited from their parents. They had a feeling that the younger generation would also inherit some of their experiences, whether they wanted them or not.

Works Cited

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