

## The City Never Sleeps

The elevator doors parted and Destiny hurried up to the front door, taking out her keys before she could even come to a stop. The door swung open. She looked back, checking to see that she was still alone.

Still in the hallway, she kicked off her shoes and began stripping. First, she untied the knot of the scarf atop her head and finished by removing her underwear. Once done, she swiftly crammed each black article of clothing into the plastic bag she had tucked behind the door.

She dropped the bag where she stood, making sure not to make the mistake of bringing it in with her.

After kicking the front door shut with her heel, she sprinted across the room to the bathroom, first washing her hands in the sink. The bronze returned to the skin on her hands as she wet and lathered them. She scrubbed up to her elbows, going in between each of her fingers as she felt the burn of the soap.

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After several sprays of Clorox cleaner over the sink—she had touched the knobs with her hands—into the shower she went, leaving her bag of clothes in the hallway for her to prepare to bring inside.

As the hot water pelted her skin she could almost feel some of her worries wash away,

along with all of the other things she felt had followed her back home. Holding to this ritual was the only thing that has stopped her from completely shutting down over the last few weeks.

Finally done with her shower, and fully dressed in a hoodie and a pair of bleach-stained, slightly too big pajamas, Destiny lingered in front of the bathroom mirror. When she was sure her eyes looked okay, she walked out to the living room and settled down on the sofa next to Mia. She could see Mia peer at her from the corner of her eye. For a second, she wondered if Mia had realized her shower had taken longer than usual. Snuggling up to her and receiving Mia's hand in her lap, Destiny stared ahead at the TV screen. Don was discussing the growing number of cases with a panel of speakers. Destiny had never met him before, and the 2 or 3 additional faces on screen changed daily, but Don and his contributors seamlessly became part of the daily routine.

A city native and Humanities professor at one of the city's countless colleges reminisced about what the city used to be in its not-so-distant past.

“The city that never sleeps’ just *means* something different now. Instead of coming from long nights socializing with friends, exploring new city blocks, or even working hard to make a living, now the restlessness comes from a different place. It comes from the numbers that keep climbing higher and higher. From the sirens that wail through the streets night and day now more than ever, like clockwork. From the fear that this thing might just reach out and choose to touch your life next. Of course this city can't sleep, people are dying! We're dying! You can't sleep if you're dead and you can't sleep when you're mourning the dead.”

“That's exactly right Mike,” responded the young House representative. “Our city's people are dying and our federal government isn't doing a *thing* about it,” she added.

Destiny used to love the city, and though that love still lingered some place deep, she

couldn't help but feel bitter. She hadn't always felt like this.

Along with the city, Destiny had started to change. It was going on three weeks since Mia first noticed. Being stuck at home gave her all the time in the world to see it. Destiny had been losing weight. Just enough that her pants didn't quite hug her hips in the same way anymore. She'd retired from her daily 30-minute fashion consultations; now she only cared to wear "whatever meant less laundry at the end of the week", the answer she gave Mia when she asked. That way they could be quickly in and out of the laundromat, which—despite its strict social distancing restrictions—always seemed to have a few too many people inside. Mia had believed her.

No longer enjoying the buzz and bustle of the city, Destiny tried her best to minimize any time spent outside of the sheltered confines of their 6th floor apartment. The schedule she'd come up with for them was the following: Tuesday night - laundry; Wednesday night - grocery shopping. And even then, reduced to just two daunting excursions a week, Mia could see Destiny had taken to washing her hands a little too frequently. This side of their threshold, with Mia, was the only place she could find some relief from the dangers of the world.

Destiny looked down at their fingers intertwined, Mia's deep espresso tone against her own chestnut. She couldn't forget the day they first met. It was sophomore fall, at a party on campus hosted by the BSU. The house was full of people, so many that looking back, it made her a little uneasy. That night Destiny had tried to make herself one with the wall, the way she usually did at parties. But Mia stayed on the dance floor all night, her body swaying along with the music and flawlessly adapting to each genre change. There was a fearlessness in Mia's eyes when their gazes locked. Destiny mostly tried to look away, but each time she looked up her eyes caught Mia's. Mia couldn't hide it, and she never wanted to. Hiding wasn't something she'd been

taught to do. It wasn't until countless kickbacks thrown by mutual friends and too many months later, that Mia confirmed what she'd sensed all along. Destiny had felt something too. It had taken them a while to get where they were, curled up on their sofa, quarantining in domesticated bliss. Destiny was slow moving, and Mia, constantly waiting for her to come around.

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With the news segment ending, Don Lemon began to address the viewers at home, reminding them, "Cases continue to climb across the country as the death count nears 100,000." *100,000*. The number struck Destiny. Ever since her father was diagnosed, more than a month before, she thought she'd started to feel those numbers incrementing in the pit of her stomach.

Destiny looked over her shoulder at Mia—whose eyes were still focused on the TV—and then down at the phone beside her. Picking up her phone from the sofa, she ignored the ash on the back of her hand that made the skin appear grey. She had a few missed calls, all from her mother; that morning, Destiny's mother had asked her to go back home with her, saying she was worried about her daughter being alone after having to say goodbye to her father for the last time.

Destiny thought back to their phone call over a month before.

"Is he gonna be alright?" Destiny had blurted out. "How long does he have to stay there? And we can't even visit?"

Her mother had barely begun to answer one question before she had another one coming her way. Waiting for her mom to answer, Destiny's mind had started to race as she thought of all the things she wanted to ask, all the things she needed to know.

"Destiny, baby, slow down. They don't know yet. Your father's gonna be there for a while. And all we can do is pray he comes back to us," her mother said.

He didn't come back.

When she and Mia first heard about it on the news it seemed like some distant thing that would never hit home. Destiny couldn't believe this was what her life had come to. She slid her hand out from Mia's and walked over to look out the window. It felt as if there was a weight lying across her chest which made it a task to breathe. She told herself that the weight on her chest was the weight of the world. That it was the weight of her city, the same weight every other person who had lost someone carried.

But deep inside she knew that maybe the heaviness came from the knowledge that while the little girl in her was bordering on inconsolable, her twenty-something adult self was experiencing a kind of freedom that she'd never known.

Destiny remembered accompanying her father on early afternoon runs on his days off to Mama's, the little Jamaican restaurant where they'd buy the day's lunch. Coconut rice and peas with brown stew chicken, a side of cabbage, and of course some original Shirley Biscuits for his little princess. He'd said Mama's reminded him a little of home. And in spite of never having been to the island herself, going to Mama's always made Destiny feel as if she'd walked the

same streets and breathed in the same air as he had when he was a kid. The smell of curry took her to her grandmother's front yard on Spanish Town Road, where her father was raised; and their national dish, ackee and saltfish, sent her to the salty sea breeze that rolled off the waves down by the beach. In those days, everywhere daddy went, Destiny tried to follow. Sometimes food was the closest she could get.

Destiny didn't feel any connection to what she now thought of as distant memories. As she got older, she and her father drifted and things between them just were never the same. It had something to do with her going away to college and returning *not* his little girl, but someone else altogether. Or maybe it had something to do with reality setting in, the years passing by. With each orbit of the sun his child became more of a woman, something he loathed; and she dreaded the thought that he would see the entire transition happen. It was clear in Destiny's memory, the first time he had confessed to her that he never wanted a daughter. He told her of the times he prayed to the heavens, day in and day out, that if he ever had a child it wouldn't be a girl. And how when the time came, he had no choice but to accept her, his daughter. She looked just like him after all. That day he wept and begged for her forgiveness, saying he was sorry that the thought had ever crossed his mind and the words had ever left his mouth all those years ago. He hadn't meant it, he was talking nonsense when he'd said those things.

"It's okay daddy, don't cry. I forgive you," she said. And she meant it. She really had forgiven him then.

Destiny could still see her mother's hand gravitating towards her father's back at the sight of his tears. She stood there and watched as the hand took on hypnotic circular motions she later came to discern as consolation. They watched old Westerns that night—her father's favorite—and called it family bonding. Destiny was five.

As Destiny grew older, she began occasionally looking back to that day. And each time, she would feel the doubt of her father's sincerity bubble up inside her a little more. She had forgiven. She tried to forget, but those old prayers of protest against her very existence stayed with her. And somewhere along the way the furtive glances between her and female classmates commenced. It was then Destiny understood her father's tears had been in vain and some day her father would recognize her as something he couldn't forgive. And her mother's hand would once again take its place on his back. The lesson was instilled in Destiny early on: that Eden's first dwellers were named Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve. She imagined not Ava and Eve either. No other union was adequate.

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The feel of Mia's arms wrapping around her waist drew Destiny out from her thoughts. Destiny continued looking out of the window. Mia tried to see what it was that held her there. "You alright, babe?" asked Mia.

"Mhm," sounded Destiny.

"You sure?"

Finally turning from the window, Destiny pulled Mia in, so that they stood face to face. She looked into Mia's expectant eyes. Then, she filled the silence between them with her lips, striving to make sure Mia felt the love. It was an act that signaled to Mia that she'd never overcome the depth of the wall she'd set out to break down. Mia bore her kiss, and Destiny could

feel her girlfriend's shoulders slump.

"I'm sure."

Destiny rarely spoke about her parents with Mia, though she'd lost track of how many times she'd visited Mia's childhood home. The first time she met Mia's family, Destiny recalled, they were celebrating a holiday. Maybe it was Kwanzaa. There were gifts for everyone, even Destiny. The entire experience was bizarre. But she could tell they really loved Mia, and that they'd accepted her too.

Mia pulled back from Destiny, studying her face one last time before she walked away. Night falls and Destiny lies awake on her back, staring up at the ceiling. She listens to the wax and wane of sirens. When she thinks Mia is asleep, she reaches under the covers and feels for the hand she knows she'll find beside her. She doesn't realize Mia has taken to sleeping on her other side.