

Don't Bother, a new play based "Craft in the Real World" by Matthew Salesses
By Jake Alexander

CHARACTERS

PROF. ROBERTA GOODE, mid-40's, BIPOC female-identifying, a creative-writing professor

SAM, early-twenties, white male-identifying

AALIYAH, early-twenties, Black female-identifying

(Lights up. A college lecture hall, serving a predominantly-White, but progressive, college campus in suburban America. PROF. ROBERTA GOODE is at a lectern. She gives the end of her lecture.)

PROF. GOODE

When we speak of the craft of writing, we are talking about a skill that are inherently misogynistic, homophobic, anti-feminist, and patriarchal. We are talking about a skill that requires you to consider the classics: Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Conrad, Marlowe; and disregard the rest. It's an "form", if we can call it that, that has been entirely identified and "mastered" by white men. Straight white men at that, although there is reason to believe that Shakespeare did have homoerotic tendencies. Either way, I digress. *(A beat.)* Even the term we assign to these classics- "masters" of their form, has its own patriarchal ties. To become the "master" of something is to overcome it, to control it, to determine it's worth. And are we willing to let these guys, these men, these pillars of the patriarchy control the craft? Define it? Design it? When the world shifts so quickly around us? Are these men still the "classics", then? Do we want them to be the only ones we learn from, study, examine, evaluate? Should we only care about what they cared about? These writers explored topics that were meant for those who could read, and by that

I mean: for whom reading was available. Now we understand why literacy was the marker of intelligence for so longer; you've heard me all say this before. This class was, of course, designed to challenge what you've been taught this entire time. That's why we picked a part of college admissions essays. Why we challenged your own biographies. We won't read any "classics" in here. We won't need them. We will, in fact, challenge everything they wanted us to shut up about. This lecture, this seminar, this workshop is designed to shape a new generation of writers. To fill the field with writers who understand the power and awesome responsibility we have as artists. I want you, new artists, to walk through the world questioning the way you shape it, the way you talk about it. Are you feeding into the problem? Are you exploring ways in which your own writing can awaken, can demonstrate to even later generation how best to tear down the world we see in front of us, the pillars of oppression, the "classics"? Are you doing enough? *(She looks at a clock.)* We're almost out of time, but I wanted to mention that I have your shorts,

due last week, for those of you who didn't turn it in, too late now. A review or those who neglected the assignment: we wanted to explore implied audience. Do we need to redefine for anyone? I'm seeing more than one glazed face, so let's. Implied audience: who we write for. In its most basic sense. Who we picture when we write it all down. There a question as to whether we ever get the audience we hope for. Ultimately we don't get control of that, but the pathetic attempts we make at marketing and labelling our works, that's where we find our work to be futile. Because the phrase "knowing your audience" is, in its essence, a basis of the "craft" of

writing, and thus, patriarchal. We can't know our audience. And that's what I wanted you to explore this week. (*We hear people shuffling around, students getting up out of seats.*) Alright that's going to do it for today, come grab your graded shorts here (*She puts a stack of assignments on the lectern.*) And Mr. Peterson?

SAM (*from the back of the audience*)
Yeah?

PROF. GOODE
I need to speak to you, briefly. Thank you, class dismissed.

(*SAM enters from where we heard his voice, approaches the lectern. PROF. GOODE waits until the class has mostly filed out.*)

SAM
Hey Professor Goode, great lecture today.

PROF. GOODE
Please, Sam, call me Roberta.

SAM (*uncomfortable*)
Okay. Roberta.

PROF. GOODE
So, I wanted to talk to you about the assignment-

SAM
My short?

PROF. GOODE
No, actually, you did well. B-minus.

SAM
Oh.

PROF. GOODE
You sound disappointed.

SAM
To be honest? Yeah.

PROF. GOODE
Explore that. Briefly: I have another lecture.

SAM
I just feel like I'm not making any progress in this class.

PROF. GOODE
Well as you say, I agree.

SAM
I'm sorry?

PROF. GOODE
That's a good start, but let me explain: you're not making any progress.

SAM
Shit, you think so? I just was, kind of, saying that.

PROF. GOODE
The assignment I'm talking about was your personal full-length.

SAM
Yeah?

PROF. GOODE
It was...incredibly offensive.

(A beat.)

SAM
It was about me.

PROF. GOODE
It was the way you wrote it. It's caused me great distress.

SAM
That wasn't my intention.

PROF. GOODE
Well that doesn't really matter-

SAM
No I mean, I didn't want to offend you. If you just gave me some notes on the piece, I'd be happy to rework it-

PROF. GOODE
I don't know if that would do any good.

SAM
I know you said I'm not progressing in the seminar, I agree, I feel like I'm up against a wall, and maybe with your help I can-

PROF. GOODE
It wasn't just me.

SAM
What do you mean?

PROF. GOODE
Well that's what I wanted to talk to you about, what I wanted to, really, warn you about.

SAM
Warn me?

PROF. GOODE
Your piece is being reviewed by the academic board.

SAM
What- why?

PROF. GOODE
The dean thought-

SAM
Why is the dean involved?

PROF. GOODE
Because I brought the piece to the chair of the department, and she thought it best to pass it up to the next rung on the ladder.

SAM
Professor-

PROF. GOODE
Roberta, please.

SAM
Roberta. I really think we can work this out, I don't even know what I did wrong.

PROF. GOODE
I told you, the full-length you wrote was incredibly offensive.

SAM
But if we could just talk about what I got wrong, and I can fix it, I know I can-

PROF. GOODE
I'm afraid this isn't up for debate. And I'm afraid there's nothing to be done to "fix" it.

SAM
But you're also not telling me HOW it's offensive!

PROF. GOODE
I've said all I can say, Mr. Peterson.

SAM
It's Sam.

PROF. GOODE
What's that?

SAM
My name is Sam, it's fucking Sam.

(A beat. PROF. GOODE starts packing up her things.)

PROF. GOODE
Right. Sam. Well. I just wanted to bring the matter to your attention, you'll be contacted by the academic board soon, I imagine. I just wanted to give you a little forewarning. I'm happy to touch base again in the future.

SAM
You really can't tell me what I did that was so wrong?

PROF. GOODE *(walking away, turning back)*
You just can't write about that.

(PROF. GOODE exits. Scene shifts. SAM stands outside the lecture hall, he texts on his phone. He looks upset. AALIYAH sits nearby on a bench, reading a book.)

SAM *(under his breath, shakily)*
Fucking fuck.

(AALIYAH notices him, doesn't put her book away. She looks around. SAM isn't going anywhere, and she has no way to escape without him noticing. SAM dials his phone. He listens to it ring, finally it goes to voicemail.)

SAM *(phone to his ear)*
Hey, Mom, it's me. I don't know if you have a shift today, but I just needed to. I had to tell you.
(He sighs deep.) Just give me a call back when you can, I'm heading back to my dorm. I just need to tell you about something. Okay. Love you. Bye.

(He hangs up the phone. He looks like he's about to cry. AALIYAH looks at him. She puts her book away. She decides.)

AALIYAH
You alright?

SAM (*turning to face her*)
Oh! Oh. Hey, yeah, yeah, I'm fine.

AALIYAH
Doesn't sound like it.

SAM
No, no I'm fine.

AALIYAH (*turning back to her book*)
Okay.

(*A beat. SAM looks around, doesn't know what to do.*)

SAM
Good book?

AALIYAH
Sorry?

SAM
Is that a good book? I've been meaning to read it.

AALIYAH (*smiling*)
No you haven't.

SAM
I have?

AALIYAH
You haven't. You haven't even heard of this book.

SAM
I have, it was a best-seller.

AALIYAH
You can say that about pretty much any book and it'd be true.

SAM
No, I really have been meaning to read it.

AALIYAH

You can just ask me what you want to ask me, we don't have to go through this whole "cool book, been meaning to read it" shit.

SAM

I'm not trying to ask you anything-

AALIYAH

Oh, come on.

SAM

I'm not like, hitting on you or anything.

AALIYAH

You're not my type-/

SAM

/Which is good, because I'm not hitting on you.

AALIYAH

I'm just trying to enjoy the day, you know? Been stuck in lectures since 8AM.

SAM

Sure. Okay. Well I wasn't trying to bother you or anything.

AALIYAH

Why did you call your mom?

SAM

I thought you wanted to read your book.

AALIYAH

You're incredibly distracting.

SAM

Well I'm sorry about that.

AALIYAH

Why did you call your mom?

SAM

I just got some bad news. You don't call your mom when you get bad news?

AALIYAH

There wouldn't be any one to call.

SAM
Oh. I'm sorry-

AALIYAH
You don't have to apologize, white boy.

SAM
I'm don't feel obligated or anything, I just didn't know you didn't have-

AALIYAH
I have a mom, I just can't call her.

SAM
Wow, this is all... I really just wanted to know how the book was.

AALIYAH
Hey. I'm kidding.

SAM
Oh. Okay.

AALIYAH
I'm just messing around.

SAM
Okay. About what part?

AALIYAH
All of it. The book is good, and yes, I call my mom. Regardless of news.

SAM
Okay.

(A beat.)

SAM *(gesturing to the lecture hall)*
Are you in that class?

AALIYAH
With Roberta? Yeah. Did she give you a hard time?

SAM
Sort of.

AALIYAH
She's tough. I love it.

SAM
That's for sure.

AALIYAH
I'm surprised you're in the class.

SAM
Well I'm a creative-writing major.

AALIYAH
You're like, one of three white people in that room.

SAM
Am I?

AALIYAH
You didn't notice?

SAM
I guess I don't see color.

(A beat. AALIYAH gets up.)

AALIYAH
Fuck you.

SAM
Hey, hey! I was just kidding. Sorry, bad joke.

AALIYAH *(turning to him)*
So you know you're the minority in there?

SAM
I really was just kidding. Of course I know that.

AALIYAH
How does it make you feel?

SAM *(carefully thought out)*
I don't mind. Getting a new perspective.

AALIYAH *(warning)*
Careful.

SAM
Why?

AALIYAH
You're toe-ing the line of "nice white liberal".

SAM (*smiling*)
I'll have to watch it.

AALIYAH (*smiling back*)
You will.

(*A beat.*)

SAM
Do you mind- sorry, if this is weird or whatever, do you mind telling me what you got on your short?

AALIYAH
I guess I kind of do.

SAM
Right. Sorry.

AALIYAH
Why, what did you get?

SAM
I'm not telling if you don't tell.

AALIYAH
Why're you in the class? Seriously?

SAM
I honestly want to be a better writer. And I'm not one-hundred-percent sure how a straight, white, male writer can be one with the world shifting the way it is and not adapting with it.

AALIYAH
Good answer.

SAM
Thanks.

AALIYAH
You're full of shit, you know?

SAM
How?

AALIYAH
You don't want to be a better writer. You want to be a different *kind* of white writer.

SAM
I don't think I know what you mean.

AALIYAH
What she's teaching us in the room is that the way we learned to write all those years ago, how expression was "formed" was built on the wrong stuff. And so we have to redefine it. Us, our generation, this seminar and others. You and I. But I think you're afraid it's moving on without you. The world. I don't think we need another straight white male writer. And so why try to be better?

(*A beat.*)

SAM
Are you always this forward with people you just met?

AALIYAH
Almost exclusively.

SAM
Well. You couldn't be more wrong.

AALIYAH
Okay. If you say so.

SAM
I really just want to be better, and I think this class will make me better.

AALIYAH
I got an A. On the short.

SAM (*after a beat*)
Damn.

AALIYAH
Yeah.

SAM
I don't think anyone has ever gotten an A in her class. Like, ever.

AALIYAH
I've gotten three.

(A beat.)

SAM
So you're pretty good then?

AALIYAH
"Pretty" good?

SAM
I mean-

AALIYAH
Already diminishing my accomplishments?

SAM
I'm not trying to-

AALIYAH
Gotta tear the black girl down to feel better?

SAM
I swear. I wasn't.

AALIYAH
You don't get my humor do you?

(A beat. SAM looks relieved.)

SAM
Oh, you're kidding, thank god.

AALIYAH
If we're going to get along you should probably learn my sense of humor.

SAM
We're going to get along?

(A beat.)

AALIYAH
I'm Aaliyah.

SAM
Sam.

AALIYAH
Sam Peterson?

SAM
Yeah, how'd did you know that?

AALIYAH
I heard her call your name after class. You got in trouble?

SAM
Not exactly.

AALIYAH
What did you do?

(SAM stares at her. Scene shifts. Another lecture, about a week later. PROF. GOODE at the lectern.)

PROF. GOODE

We spoke last week about how the craft of writing is all about expectations. Anyone care to elaborate? *(A beat. Silence from the students. PROF. GOODE is exasperated.)* Alright, well let's review. When I say expectations I mean rules. There are rules we follow when we talk about archetype, audience, etc. Do we follow these expectations, or do we purposefully go against them? When we do either, what does that do to the story we are trying to tell? Matthew Salesses said it best when he wrote "Craft is the history of which kind of stories have typically held power- and for whom- so it also is the history of which stories have typically been omitted." A brilliant quote, you should all memorize it. Now. When we talk about breaking the expectations, we, currently, cannot break out of the craft because breaking the expectations has also become craft. We ran out of stories to tell, so we started telling the stories we specifically weren't telling. And now we are running out of those. I'll give an example: we have told the story of Cinderella over and over and over. Women in a lower status pretends to be someone else for a night to gain favor of a man in a higher class. Then she shows her true colors. And he shows his and accepts her for what she is. Right? And when we got sick of the same old trope, the archetypes we grew to know and expect, we made a story that seemingly followed the story of Cinderella but then we, at the last minute, changed the ending. The man doesn't accept the lower-class woman. We told the story with a black lead. We made the woman realize she's better than the higher class man because she still has morals. We changed the glass slipper, the pumpkin, the fairy god mother. We shook up the expectation and the audience got a new story. And we have done that with everything: every story that already been written we have rewritten with a new ending. And those rewritten stories have now become canon. They carry new expectations. We can't tell the same story over and over so we have to try a new way; we expect that now. We expect twists, in the plot, surprise endings. The idea of "they've been dead the whole time". Right? The craft of

writing, as we know it, has made it nearly impossible to come up with new stories using the expectations we have, so we need to break the whole system down. The old rules will never play with the new stories. Much like any other patriarchal system that exists in our society, we can't fix it, so we have to tear it down and start over. So: what stories have we omitted thus far? What ways can we give those stories life? What stories have we specifically left out because they don't fit our expectations? When we are talking about reviews from the workshop, I hear a lot of people saying "that didn't work" or "that didn't fit". These as criticisms are, in fact, entirely problematic and oppressive. Because when we say that, we are saying to the author that they didn't meet the expectations, and as a result, the piece suffered. But who said that meeting those expectations, that "following the rules", made a story successful? Who said that it made one story better than another? I think you know who. And for those of you looking to challenge the "typical" reader, that's where we should start. By throwing out the rule book, and starting over.

(Scene shifts. A coffee shop. AALIYAH and SAM sit opposite each other. There's still some distance between them. SAM reads a story he's written.)

SAM

I really thought I did better on this one.

AALIYAH

You have to read the comments first, don't just go to the grade on the back. Understand where she's coming from.

SAM

She hardly wrote any comments! Look at this!

(SAM shows her the story, flipping through the pages. AALIYAH looks over.)

AALIYAH

You're flipping too fast, I can't see. Just give me the damn story.

SAM

I don't want you to see the grade.

AALIYAH

I'm not going to think less of you because of one grade, Sam. I just want to read what you wrote.

(SAM hands AALIYAH the story, she reads through carefully. SAM looks nervously, finally pulls out his phone. He scrolls for a bit. He taps his foot. He drums his fingers on the table. AALIYAH snaps.)

AALIYAH

Sam!

SAM

What? Oh. Sorry.

(A beat. She continues reading. Finally gets to the last page. She reads then lands on the grade.)

AALIYAH

Whoa.

SAM

What? That bad huh?

AALIYAH

No! I mean- no, not bad.

SAM

Really-really bad?

AALIYAH

No, not at all. I guess I am as surprised you got what you got.

SAM

You mean the grade?

AALIYAH

Yeah.

SAM

Right? God, I'm so glad you said that. I'm not like trying to complain or anything, but it's kind of insane. That she thought it was that bad.

AALIYAH

No I mean I'm surprised she didn't give you worse.

(A beat. SAM grabs the story back.)

SAM

Fuck you, too.

AALIYAH

I'm just being honest: that wasn't a good story. Why did you write it like that?

SAM

Like what?

AALIYAH

Why did you write it from the perspective of a gay man?

SAM

Because that's the story I wanted to tell. She told us to not follow the rules- the expectations.

AALIYAH

But you aren't a gay man.

SAM

I knew you were going to judge me.

AALIYAH

I'm not judging you.

SAM

You are, you thought it was bad.

AALIYAH

Just because you wrote about something you don't have any experience with.

SAM

Okay but subtract that. Like, forget who I am, me being me: what did you think of the story then?

AALIYAH

You can't do that.

SAM

Do what?

AALIYAH

Subtract you from the thing you wrote.

SAM

This was about implied audience and implied author-

AALIYAH

I know what the assignment was.

SAM

So I was trying to challenge that. Like people would see my name, and be like: a white, straight man. And I was trying to challenge their perspective by making it that the implied author isn't that way.

AALIYAH

You don't get it: the implied author is not up to you, it's what they get out of it.

SAM
Who? The reader?

AALIYAH
When you read something, you read it in your own voice. The implied author is the narrator. And the assumption that the implied author and the narrator are the same person? We talked about Joseph Conrad, people saying he's not racist, his narrator is. But it's implied that because the narrator is racist, the implied author is as well. So Conrad is racist.

SAM
What did you get?

AALIYAH
What do you mean?

SAM
On the assignment. What did you get for a grade?

AALIYAH
I got an A.

SAM
So that's four? Fuck me.

AALIYAH
Okay.

(A beat.)

SAM
Oh, I wasn't like, trying to-

AALIYAH
I'm kidding! When are you going to get it?

SAM
You're super hard to read.

AALIYAH
I like to keep you on your toes.

SAM
Well you definitely do.

(A beat. They stare at each other for a moment, it's kind of tense. After a beat, SAM's phone starts buzzing. He's distracted, suddenly realizes it's his. He looks down and sees it's his mother calling.)

SAM
Oh! Oh. Shit. Sorry, I have to take this.

AALIYAH
You do you.

SAM
I should-actually...I gotta run.

AALIYAH
You don't want me to hear what your mom is going to say to you?

SAM
Not really, no.

AALIYAH *(taking his hand)*
Sam, I'm not judging you.

(A beat. AALIYAH still holds SAM's hand. SAM's phone still rings.)

SAM
I know. Thanks for reading what I wrote. And thanks for being honest. But I gotta take this.

AALIYAH
You going to tell her about why you're in trouble?

SAM
I have to, yeah.

AALIYAH
You going to tell her about me?

SAM
What's there to tell?

(A beat. AALIYAH let's go of SAM's hand. SAM picks up the phone.)

SAM *(into phone)*
Hey Mom, hold on one sec. *(to AALIYAH)* Can I text you later?

AALIYAH *(amused)*
Oh, are we texting now?

SAM
Yeah. I mean-

AALIYAH
I'm around.

SAM
Okay. Okay, bye. *(into phone, grabbing his bag)* Hey Mom, how're you doing?

(SAM goes to grab the story. AALIYAH puts her hand on top of it. She wants to keep it. SAM lets go of the story, and exits. AALIYAH looks after him for a bit, then turns back to the story. She reads it again. Scene shifts. PROF. GOODE and SAM in a small office. SAM's nervous.)

SAM
I appreciate you making the time.

PROF. GOODE
Of course. Office hours are for everyone.

SAM
Right. Well, I think the extra time would help me. As a writer.

PROF. GOODE
Obviously I can't discuss any pending investigations.

SAM
Right. I haven't actually heard anything from the board-

PROF. GOODE
See, that's what I mean. I can't talk about it. Please avoid the topic.

SAM
Okay, okay, sorry. Well I actually was curious about something you mentioned in the last lecture, you talked about the intended reader. I had some questions-

PROF. GOODE *(no-nonsense)*
What're your questions?

SAM
Oh. Well. I can email them if you'd rather I do this that way?

PROF. GOODE *(not convincingly)*
No, no. I'm here for all my students.

SAM

Okay. Well. You said in the lecture we should identify who our reader is.

PROF. GOODE

Yes.

SAM

I don't know why. Isn't it not up to us who the reader is?

PROF. GOODE

The reader is different from the audience.

SAM

Okay, how?

PROF. GOODE

The audience is who eventually ends up reading your book. The Reader is who you hope will

SAM

So who you market to?

PROF. GOODE

You're missing the point of it: when we read each others' pieces in class, we offer a wide variety of readers to the writer, yes?

SAM

I guess so.

PROF. GOODE

Well the writer will obviously get different criticism and critique from different readers, and might not even hear from their implied or intended reader at all.

SAM

Does that change anything though? Don't you want a wide variety of readers?

PROF. GOODE

What if I wrote about the black experience and no black readers wrote it? Doesn't that change how my writing is interpreted?

SAM

So I have to say who I wrote it for, in order to get the criticism I want?

PROF. GOODE

You're close, but not quite. By stating who your intended reader is, we can begin to unpack how you went about writing the piece and why you started in the first place.

SAM
But I want to write for everyone.

(A beat.)

PROF. GOODE
Well that's doing a disservice to the workshop, then.

SAM
How?

PROF. GOODE
Mr. Peterson, stories that are about minority experiences or by minority voices often get forgotten. They often are read by entirely white audiences and rarely get placed in front of the eyes of readers they wrote for. They are "othered", we call it. Because the typical, forgive me for using such a banal term, workshop reader is *not* "other", we often look at writing that is "othered" as bad, or not within what we expect. We talked about expectations a few lectures back, remember? We talked about how the craft as we know it has shaped those expectations, and the minute a piece begins to stray from them, we begin to think of that piece as not well-written. So we state who our intended reader is, we define our reader, so that we can understand the new expectations we are setting. We don't want to force an author to meet the expectations that the patriarchal craft has set in place. Rather, we want to meet the workshop to meet the author from where they are.

(A beat. SAM looks lost.)

SAM
But so then....I mean- how do you write for a wider audience? For all voices?

PROF. GOODE
Mr. Peterson-

SAM
It's just Sam, please. I'm serious, I want to write for everyone. I want to write to the masses.

PROF. GOODE
Well lucky for you, the masses are readily available to white, straight, cis-male writers

SAM
Wow.

PROF. GOODE
That seemed rude, I understand. But I'm trying to get you to break down the craft as you learned it. To help build a new one, and you can't start from trying to be commercially acceptable. That's a form of colonization, you see. You're colonizing the workshop by trying to meet the expectations that you learned in say, high school.

SAM
I'm not a colonizer.

PROF. GOODE (*continuing*)
I want you to write about your experience. I don't want you to try to find a wider audience than the one you represent.

SAM
Well no one wants to hear from a white writer right now.

PROF. GOODE
Well that's the way the world is shifting.

SAM
So I should just give up? Not even try?

PROF. GOODE
The problem is that your not-defining a reader doesn't help you as a writer. It's having an impact on the lecture, I can tell.

SAM
I'm taking away from others' experience now?

PROF. GOODE
It's alright, we caught it early and it's being brought to your attention. Now you can learn from it-

SAM
But I'm not fucking learning anything!

PROF. GOODE
Mr. Peterson.

(*A beat. SAM stands.*)

SAM
I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated. I didn't mean to yell.

PROF. GOODE
That's alright. That passion is good. Ultimately I want you to bring that to your writing. You might see your grades improve.

SAM
Sure.

PROF. GOODE

Maybe you could reach out to some of your classmates. They could certainly help you with some of these concepts.

SAM

That's a good idea. I won't take up anymore of your time.

PROF. GOODE

Well I appreciate you stopping in. And I appreciate your persistence in trying to improve.

(SAM turns to exit. He stops himself.)

SAM

Professor?

PROF. GOODE

Roberta is really fine, Sam.

SAM

If my experience is shared by the majority, how come I can't try to write outside of that? Try something new?

PROF. GOODE

Well. It's part of a larger issue. We don't all write to the same audience. You think your values are universal. But the values we have are cultural, and not shared. *(A beat.)* Thank you for stopping by. I'm here anytime.

(Scene shifts. AALIYAH's dorm room. She's in sweats, and wears head phones. She dances around to music we can vaguely hear. There's a knock at her door. She doesn't hear it. There's another knock, louder this time. Finally we hear muffled voices in the hall, a brief conversation. A room code is entered and the door opens. SAM stands there. AALIYAH doesn't notice him at first, then in the midst of a dance move turns and faces him. She screams.)

AALIYAH

What the fuck!

SAM

Sorry! Sorry, one of the girls on the floor let me in.

AALIYAH

You scared the shit out of me.

SAM

I didn't mean to, I knocked.

AALIYAH
What're you doing here?

SAM
I wanted to- sorry. About having to run the other day.

AALIYAH
You came here to say that?

SAM
Yeah. And to...

AALIYAH
How did you even know what dorm I was in?

SAM
Oh. I found it on the portal, they list everyone's.

AALIYAH
That's kind of a violation.

SAM
I think they just was to encourage everyone to make friends.

AALIYAH
That's stupid.

(A beat. SAM doesn't move. AALIYAH sits on her bed.)

AALIYAH
So you want to be my friend?

SAM
Have you gone to office hours? With Prof. Goode?

AALIYAH
With Roberta? Once, I think?

SAM
Oh. Did you find that it was...I dunno, did it help?

AALIYAH
Help with what?

SAM
I don't know. Your writing?

AALIYAH
I don't get you Ivory Tower.

SAM
Excuse me?

AALIYAH
It's what I've been calling you. Ivory Tower.

SAM
Because you think I'm...tall?

AALIYAH
Privileged. And white.

SAM
I don't really like that.

AALIYAH
I don't really care.

SAM
Okay, this was stupid. I shouldn't have come here.

AALIYAH
Why did you come here? Just to apologize and ask about office hours?

SAM
I guess so. And also, I got some bad news and I didn't know who else to go to.

AALIYAH
What's the bad news?

SAM
Well.

(SAM takes out a letter from his pocket. It's on official letterhead. AALIYAH gets up and goes to him and grabs the letter. She reads it.)

AALIYAH
Oh shit. Academic probation?

SAM
Yeah. I could lose my scholarship.

AALIYAH

They say this isn't your first offense, what did you do?

SAM

There were some. I guess you'd call them incidents, with some friends I made last year.

AALIYAH

You and a bunch of white boys causing havoc all over campus, huh?

SAM

I guess. But if I lose the scholarship I won't be able to stay.

AALIYAH

So what?

SAM

What do you mean?

AALIYAH

Do you want me to feel bad for you?

SAM (*taking back the letter*)

You know what, okay. I get it. I shouldn't have come here. We aren't friends.

AALIYAH

Why aren't you at the dorm of those guys? Your friends from before.

SAM

I'm trying to do better.

AALIYAH (*looking at the letter*)

Why does it say you're being investigated by the Racial Justice and Cultural Diversity Officer?

SAM

I guess it has something to do with that thing I wrote.

AALIYAH

That the reason your mom was calling?

SAM

Yeah.

AALIYAH

So you came here for what? Sympathy?

SAM (*turning to go*)
I don't know. Forget it, I'll just go.

AALIYAH
Get your ass in here.

(SAM turns back to her. AALIYAH goes to her bed. SAM hesitates to go further into room. AALIYAH looks at him, taps next to her on the bed. SAM slowly moves towards where she's sitting.)

AALIYAH
That sucks.

SAM
Thanks. It does.

AALIYAH
Was that what you wanted? Feel better?

SAM (*laughing*)
Yes.

AALIYAH
So now what?

SAM
How was- how was your day?

AALIYAH
"How was my day?"

SAM
Yeah.

AALIYAH
That's what we're doing now?

SAM
I mean, you let me come in.

AALIYAH
I think you're the first white man I've ever had in this room.

SAM
Yeah?

AALIYAH

Yeah.

SAM

Well I'm honored.

(A beat.)

AALIYAH

You're not going to ask how many men have been in this room with me?

SAM

Oh. That's not really my business.

AALIYAH

So you just wanted me to say "sorry for your troubles" and that's that?

SAM

I really don't know why I came here. Really.

AALIYAH

What did Roberta say to you?

SAM

Do you always call her Roberta?

AALIYAH

She told us to.

SAM

Right.

AALIYAH

Did she diss your writing again?

SAM

Kind of. I had a question about the lecture and she told me to back off of certain topics. That I'm too cavalier with my trying to write outside my comfort zone.

AALIYAH

She's right.

SAM

I know, I know, you said it was bad.

AALIYAH

You just have to learn not to bother anyone.

SAM

I'm not trying to insult the "reader" or whatever.

AALIYAH

Well clearly you are. Based on that letter.

SAM

I don't even know what I did wrong that has the academic board all on me.

AALIYAH

"On you"?

SAM

Yeah why're they all over me?

AALIYAH (*laughing*)

"All over you"?

SAM

Okay can you not like, make fun of me right now? I'm kind of freaked out.

AALIYAH

Relax, Ivory Tower.

SAM

How do you do so well in her class?

AALIYAH

I just. Write what I know.

SAM

Honestly?

AALIYAH

Yes, honestly. What? You don't think I'm any good?

SAM

I didn't say that.

AALIYAH (*getting up and grabbing a story on her desk*)

Here. Read that.

SAM
What is it?

AALIYAH
It's my short form, from last week.

SAM
What did you get on it?

AALIYAH
Why're you so focused on grades?

SAM
I'm not!

AALIYAH
You are! You're always comparing us. I don't think we've had a single conversation where you didn't ask what I got on an assignment.

SAM
Sorry. My mom is always asking me so I think in those terms.

AALIYAH
Well stop. Just read it.

(SAM reads the story. AALIYAH watches him the entire time. She puts her hair up. At one point she gets up, takes off her sweatshirt. SAM looks up at that time, catches himself watching her, stops, goes back to the story. He comes to a moment that's hard to read. He looks at her. She looks back. He finishes the story. He puts it down, wipes his eyes.)

SAM
Wow.

AALIYAH
See what I mean?

SAM
That's all true?

AALIYAH
I told you I was good.

SAM
No, I mean, yes, you are. But that's all true? That all happened?

AALIYAH
I told you that I write honestly.

SAM
Why did you share that with me?

(A beat. AALIYAH stares back at SAM.)

AALIYAH
What did you write? To piss off Roberta and the Dean and everybody?

SAM
It's nothing. But. I guess it was bad.

AALIYAH
Can I read it?

SAM
No. Never.

AALIYAH *(referencing the story)*
I wrote that not intending for anyone to read it. So. Keep it to yourself, okay?

SAM
Okay.

AALIYAH
Show me the story.

SAM
What? No.

AALIYAH
Come on.

(Over the following, SAM gets up to leave and AALIYAH blocks his way. She eventually pushes him back onto the bed, stopping him from leaving. She climbs on top of him as the exchange happens.)

SAM
Aaaliyah, stop-

AALIYAH
Come on, Ivory Tower, show me what got you in such trouble./

SAM
/Come on-/

AALIYAH
Afraid I'll call you bad again?

SAM
Yes.

AALIYAH
Afraid I won't like you anymore?

SAM
I mean, sure-

AALIYAH
Afraid it's not going to end well?

SAM
Absolutely.

AALIYAH
Scared of me?

SAM
I just don't want you to read what I wrote.

AALIYAH
I can't think less of you then I do right now.

(AALIYAH has SAM pinned to the bed. They pause there.)

SAM
What're you doing?

AALIYAH
I thought you came here for sympathy.

SAM
I don't know why I came here.

AALIYAH
Then what's wrong with this?

(A beat. They stare at each other. SAM leans in to kiss her. The scene shifts. PROF. GOODE at the lectern.)

PROF. GOODE

Writing in itself is an intimate act. It's confronting the truths we don't necessarily want to see within ourselves. It's trying to make sense of the mess inside us. Reading, as a result, is how we accept that intimacy. And because of this relationship, this dependency on each other, we can do real, lasting harm with our writing. Our words carry power, have the capacity to give and take life. When we engage with these truths, when we confront *our* truths, we are attempting to relate, to connect, with our reader, implied or actual. And just like physical intimacy, or emotional intimacy, or any form of connective intimacy, we have the power to hurt. Our writing can kill, can express love, can show our truths to others. We may never know the lasting damage of our words. We may never know who we hurt or if they could ever recover. We may never know how to make it better. And so we must be careful. We must take heed. We must be mindful. The hardest thing for the writer to learn is where their boundaries lie. We as artists may create, develop, the art. And while I've attempted to instill in you all values of how to address oppression in the craft, such as identifying the intended reader, and who the implied audience is, and paying mind to where our voices need to be restricted, one thing we will never control is who the art is for. And it is our failure to accept this lesson that can lead us down a dangerous path. Writing is intimate, and so, it is incredibly dangerous.

(Scene shifts. AALIYAH and SAM in her dorm room. SAM puts on a coat and tie. AALIYAH sits in her bed, still in her pajamas, typing on her laptop. SAM adjusts his tie, gets flustered, unties and reties it. He does this several times, nosily.)

AALIYAH

Listen-

SAM

Sorry, sorry-

AALIYAH

I know you're nervous, but you've got to do *that* quieter. I'm trying to write here.

SAM

How's it coming?

AALIYAH

I'm getting somewhere.

SAM

Is this the long form or the new biography?

AALIYAH

Long form character study. I'm just expanding on an existing character.

SAM

I'm sure that's fine.

AALIYAH

She said-

SAM

She loves you. You could literally rub shit on the page and she would be cool with it.

AALIYAH

Well. Thanks.

SAM

What?

AALIYAH

It's not like I don't work for it, Sam.

SAM

I wasn't saying that, I know you do-

AALIYAH

I work for the comments I get, okay? I work really fucking hard for them.

SAM

I know you do, I know all that-

AALIYAH

I think you're really fucking nervous and taking it out on me.

SAM

I don't mean to do that. I am really nervous.

AALIYAH

Hey?

SAM (*untying the tie, throwing it on the bed*)

Yeah?

AALIYAH

I'm here, you know?

SAM (*sitting on the bed next to her*)

I do.

AALIYAH

Don't put your feet up, you're wearing shoes.

SAM

Okay do you want me to feel better or not?

AALIYAH

I do but you know I hate that. This isn't your mom's house.

SAM

Got it.

(A beat. AALIYAH puts the laptop down and scooches up next to him. She begins tying his tie for him. He lifts his chin to let her.)

SAM

I'm sorry, I'm just dreading this.

AALIYAH

I know. You were tossing and turning last night about it. You're sure you don't want me to come with you?

SAM

Absolutely not. Plus that's probably not the best look.

AALIYAH

Right. "Black girl gave me the thumbs-up, so we're good."

SAM

That's not what I meant but yeah.

AALIYAH

Well listen, it'll be fine. Just be, you know-

SAM

Apologetic and remorseful.

AALIYAH

And come back here when you're done.

SAM

Won't you still be working?

AALIYAH

Well I'll get somewhere with it and then I can help you with yours.

SAM

What's the fucking point of doing it?

AALIYAH

Hey, just because it's difficult doesn't mean you can just blow it off. It's half our grade.

SAM

Oh, now she cares about grades.

AALIYAH

Wonder where I got that from.

SAM

I'm just saying I don't want to do it. Why should I? I keep swinging for the fences and missing by a mile.

AALIYAH

Hey, Ivory Tower. Enough with the sports metaphors. I'm not your frat-friends.

SAM

I'm not friends with those guys anymore.

AALIYAH

Might want to mention that as well.

SAM

Good point. I feel like I should just drop the class. Wouldn't that fix all of this shit?

AALIYAH

What's done is done. Now you just have face up to justice. You'll be the first white boy in history to do so.

SAM

It's not like Prof. Goode is even expecting me to do well with the character study. She's going to fail me regardless.

AALIYAH

Roberta. And no she won't, she's fair.

SAM (*sarcastic*)

Yeah, okay, sure.

AALIYAH (*finishing tying his tie*)

You still have to put in the effort, Sam. That's what she wants to see.

SAM

This is incredibly frustrating. Either I follow her advice and stick to what I know or I try and I insult someone. What's the point?

AALIYAH
We'll work on it together, I promise.

(SAM gets up and moves to the door.)

SAM
Okay. You'll be here when I'm done?

AALIYAH
I will. Come back to me after.

SAM
Okay.

AALIYAH
It's going to be okay.

SAM
Yeah?

AALIYAH
Yeah. Go knock 'em dead, IT.

SAM
IT?

AALIYAH *(rolling her eyes)*
Ivory Tower.

SAM
Right.

(SAM smiles, exits. AALIYAH stares after him for a moment. She picks up her laptop, starts writing again. She stops, thinks. She stares at the spot where SAM was. She keeps writing. Scene shifts. SAM sits before the Academic Review Board. He's very nervous. We don't hear anyone else's voices during this appearance before the board.)

SAM
Hi. Yes. Thank you for letting me. You know, appear today. I really just want to clear this whole mess up *(He pauses for a response.)* Right. No, right, I understand. Yes, I did write that story. But, as I've asked Prof. Goode several times. I'm not even sure what about the piece reflects what I'm being accused of- *(A pause.)* Okay. Okay yes that is the story. But it's just a story, how was it offensive? *(A pause.)* What do you mean a pattern? *(A pause.)* A pattern of racial inequality? How have I done that? *(A pause.)* I swear I have never done any of those things! *(A pause.)* No, no yes, I did write that bit. *(A pause.)* No, I don't mean to suggest there are parts of it

I didn't write, of course I wrote all of- *(A pause.)* She said that? She suggested that I have done this before? *(A pause.)* I wish Prof. Goode had been upfront with me- no, I get why she had to remain neutral but it doesn't really sound like she was neutr- it sounds like she was the one- *(A pause.)* Yes, I am aware that she is a person of color, I'm in her class, I have great attendance. I'm sorry we're getting a little ahead of ourselves. I still don't know what about the piece, the story I mean, what about it triggered this whole- *(A pause.)* Okay, maybe triggered was the wrong word choice, I apologize. But can I just ask- right, okay, right. I need to just like, take a step back. I'm trying to understand what I did wrong. What I wrote that was wrong? *(A long pause. SAM sinks lower with every passing minute.)* Okay. Okay. Well. Wow. I really didn't realize. I guess I was trying to convey, you know be a part of a conversation. About race. I understand that like, I shouldn't be like a main voice in it, like I'm white, I get that, but I just wanted to talk about stuff that was happening around me. I thought the piece was good, I really did. I didn't even know that it would be offensive. I guess I also didn't know that those things I was accused of before, when I was friends with- and I'm not anymore! Those guys and I don't even- and I didn't know they were viewed as, you know, racist acts. I'm not a racist. I'm not. I promise. *(A pause.)* Yes, I guess I would say I was privileged, but what does that have to do with-? *(A pause.)* Yes, I would say that I haven't you know, engaged with these topics before. *(A pause.)* Why now? I don't even know how to answer that. I guess because that's what's being asked of me? I was told to write honestly. I did that. *(A pause.)* I feel like not defending myself well here. I feel like I was really unprepared, and I'm sorry about that- *(A pause. This is really bad news.)* Please. Please, I need this scholarship. I can't lose it, my mom, it's just us and she'll be so disappointed and I can't even really tell her what I did wrong- *(A pause.)* Please. I'll do anything. I swear my intentions weren't to- *(A pause.)* No, no, you need to listen to me, you need to hear me. I need to. *(A pause. The meeting is over.)* Okay. Okay. Well. Thank you for letting me. You know. Explain myself. I look forward to hearing from you all.

(SAM doesn't get up. He stares straight ahead. Scene shifts. A few weeks later. PROF. GOODE is at the lectern.)

PROF. GOODE

Okay, so let's talk about conflict. There's an old adage, which Matthew Salesses examines in his book, that conflict is seen as inevitable. That it must "come from somewhere". But Salesses also brings into question whether the conflict must come out of the protagonist, and whether conflict must be solved by the protagonist. I see most of you nodding your head. Well, I'm sorry to say that that's wrong. Conflict cannot be added to a story without consideration of how it got there. A character cannot face conflict without considering what that conflict means. We talked before about how your characters can't exist separate from how you see the world. They are a figment of that, they are indicative of that. Context is still important, and context changes how the conflict is viewed, fought against, overcome. Just like our characters don't exist on their own, neither does conflict. Conflict comes from "somewhere" and that somewhere is the author. The author will make 35 million choices in their story. Conflict is just that: a choice. And so we have to examine how it fits within the story. Salesses says it best when he states "it is the author's responsibility to take responsibility." And here's the problem he outlines, and what we will work to dismantle: straight, white, cis-fiction has a tendency to view conflict as a matter of free-will. We think the protagonist is both the creator and solver of their conflict. This "classic" style of fiction has a tendency to give the autonomy to the protagonist, and that all conflicts can be

solved by “self work”. That’s wrong. Because what if conflict is about race? Is about gender? Is about socio-economics? Because how we view conflict in context changes the way we view these topics. Conflict has consequences for meaning. It’s not just a plot device any longer. (*A beat. She takes out a stack of papers.*) I have your character studies here. You all did well, and I don’t throw that word around lightly. But I do appreciate the work that’s being done. I want to encourage everyone to read the comments I’ve made first, and then take in account your grade. We’ll end there. Come get them.

(She places the stack of papers on the lectern. Scene shifts. Outside the lecture hall. SAM stands outside, looking through his paper. He’s upset, clearly. After a moment, AALIYAH comes out of the hall.)

AALIYAH
Hey, how’d you do?

SAM
Fuck this. Fuck this all.

AALIYAH
Bad?

SAM
Very bad.

AALIYAH
I’m sure it’s not as bad as you think.

SAM
She said we all did well. I did not. She’s a fucking liar.

AALIYAH
It’s not her fault, Sam. Don’t just blame her because you need someone to be a fault.

SAM
Now is definitely not the time for you to take her side, Aaliyah.

AALIYAH
What were her comments, can I see?

SAM *(pulling away from her)*
No, you can’t fucking see. I’m so sick of this.

AALIYAH
She just wants you to be better, she’s working at it just like you are.

SAM

Don't fucking say that. She told them I'm a problem. Did you know that? She said that it was my fault. She recommended I be expelled!

AALIYAH

I'm sure she didn't say all that.

SAM

Like, what the fuck, Aaliyah? Why can't I be right on this?

(A beat.)

SAM

What did you get?

AALIYAH

I don't think I should-

SAM

No what the fuck did you get on it? On your character study?

AALIYAH

I'm not going to stand here and have a fucking white boy shout at me. Like I don't take enough fucking abuse every day from folks who look like you.

SAM

Show me the fucking story, Aaliyah.

AALIYAH *(defiant)*

You know what? Fine.

(She pulls her story out and passes it to him. He snatches it and reads through it. As he reads, he realizes that the story is about him.)

SAM

What the fuck. Is this?

AALIYAH

I told you I write honestly.

SAM

You picked me? To write about?

AALIYAH

Yeah.

SAM
Why the fuck did you do that?

AALIYAH
I wrote about a character that already existed. I just made him more clear.

SAM
So. Let me get this straight. You can co-opt me, as a character, but I have to watch what I write?

AALIYAH
My story isn't going to fuck someone up, Sam.

SAM
It's "fucking me up" as we speak!

AALIYAH
I'm going to tell the truth, and I won't stop just for you.

SAM
So I may lose my scholarship and I'm just some fucking "study" to you?

AALIYAH
That's not what I meant-

SAM
I'm just another sob-story to write about? For *Roberta* and you to laugh and jerk each other off to?

AALIYAH
Fuck you. You privileged dick.

SAM
I'm not the one using my voice to tear anyone down.

AALIYAH
You sure about that?

(A beat. SAM turns to go.)

AALIYAH
Where are you going?

SAM
I'm going back to my room. I need to just-

AALIYAH

No, don't do that. Come over, we can talk about this.

SAM

No thanks.

AALIYAH

Sam-

SAM

Is it possible for you to show one ounce of sympathy for me? For what I'm going through?

AALIYAH

How am I supposed to show you sympathy when you won't even let me read what you wrote? You're pissed about some grade and you being treated "unfairly" by our professor, but I don't even know what you did? Maybe you fucking deserve it. And you know what, I bet you do.

SAM

Great.

(SAM starts to leave.)

AALIYAH

You're not coming over?

SAM

I think I feel bad enough. I think I'm paying enough for whatever I've done without you adding to it.

(SAM hands the story back to her. He leaves. AALIYAH is left standing there. Scene shifts. AALIYAH and PROF. GOODE at office hours.)

AALIYAH

I appreciate you making the time for me.

PROF. GOODE

For you? Anytime.

AALIYAH

I guess I struggled a bit with the character study.

PROF. GOODE

I thought you did wonderfully. Very well done. He was *so* real. I mean. The way you expanded him from earlier pieces; where did that come from?

AALIYAH

I guess I just. Saw him in someone and was able to get inspiration from that.

PROF. GOODE

You're the top of the class, Aaliyah. Every concept we've gone over, every new term, you've really grabbed a hold of them. Really grasped them.

AALIYAH

Thank you.

PROF. GOODE

I'm actually very glad you came in today, because I've been meaning to talk to you. There's an opportunity coming up, for my lecture next year. I think you'd make a great Teacher's Assistant. The university is thrilled with the course, happy to be challenging craft and the teaching of craft as we know it. I think this was a great time to adopt this course model, with their renewed focus on diversity and racial justice. This is a brand new style and they want me to expand the course to a few sections next year. And you would obviously be a part of all of them. Your success in this course makes you an ideal candidate. I know a lot of my students in this current lecture could use someone like you.

(A beat.)

AALIYAH

Wow. I really don't know what to say- I mean, thank you, obviously, for thinking of me. I'd like the chance to think it over, if that's all right?

PROF. GOODE

Of course, of course. Take your time. I do need to know by semester's-end. So we can begin preparing materials and lectures, etc. I really do hope you'll sign on, you could make a real impact on students who wish to challenge their writing.

AALIYAH

Absolutely. Thank you. I'll be sure to let you know.

PROF. GOODE

Now, down to business: what was you wanted to speak to me about.

(A beat. AALIYAH doesn't know what to say.)

AALIYAH

You know. I actually can't remember. I'm sorry, you know for being so forgetful, I think maybe the job offer and everything, has me frazzled.

PROF. GOODE

Perfectly alright. If it comes to you, you know where to find me.

(AALIYAH gets up to exit. She decides, and turns back.)

AALIYAH

I'm sorry, Roberta, but can I ask-

PROF. GOODE

What is it, dear?

AALIYAH

There's a student in our lecture, Sam Peterson?

PROF. GOODE

Ah. Yes.

AALIYAH

I just wondered how he was doing. In your eyes.

PROF. GOODE

I wasn't aware you two knew each other.

AALIYAH

We don't. Really. But you know, him being one of the few white students, I was curious.

PROF. GOODE

If I can be honest...and obviously this stays between us, but if I can honest, Mr. Peterson is not doing well. And I wouldn't waste your time getting to know him better. I don't believe he'll be with the university much longer.

AALIYAH *(trying to hide her shock)*

Can I ask why?

PROF. GOODE

I really shouldn't say, you know, I can't really comment on an ongoing investigation, but Mr. Peterson has shown through his actions, and now through his work, that he doesn't share the same values as the university.

AALIYAH

Can I ask what work it was? I mean what assignment?

PROF. GOODE

I'm sorry dear, I can't share that. But I wouldn't worry about him. He is inconsequential. You'll learn in your career as a writer: there are two types of people. The first type do everything intentionally. Not always with the best intentions, but their art is always intentional. The second type do not take intentions into account at all. In fact, they'd rather you forget or never question what their intention was. They just want the "art" to speak for itself. And that's not enough. They have to want to have the conversation, even if it's bad. Even if it hurts or stings or is brutal. And

often it will be brutal. But we know now that the art cannot speak for itself. The artist is who gives the art meaning. And so we look to that artist: for clarity, for design, for intention. I can tell when someone doesn't have intention in their pieces. Their work suffers, and it should! We shouldn't be holding up the pillars of patriarchy just to protect those that made them. It's time to tear it all down. And that starts with the artist. Mr. Peterson, as you asked, has no intention. And for that, he is unsustainable. His writing will never mean anything.

(A beat.)

AALIYAH

Can you redeem yourself? Do you think? Through your art? Can you change to become intentional?

PROF. GOODE

We don't know yet. I suppose that's up to your generation to decide.

(A beat. Scene shifts. Sometime later. AALIYAH and SAM in her dorm room. AALIYAH gets ready for a night out. SAM scrolls on his phone.)

AALIYAH

Why don't you just come out for one drink?

SAM

I'm sorry I won't be able to have fun until I hear.

AALIYAH

Well you have to distract yourself some way.

SAM

I'm just going to go-

AALIYAH

You're not leaving now, come on.

SAM

I'm supposed to hear any second.

AALIYAH

It's going to be fine.

SAM

I don't know.

AALIYAH

Sam, just come out for one drink. I just want to have a night together.

SAM

I have all my stuff with me, I haven't gone home at all.

AALIYAH

Just leave everything here, you know you'll come back afterwards.

SAM

Oh yeah?

AALIYAH

Yes.

(A beat.)

SAM

You never said where you went. After class.

AALIYAH

I saw Roberta. For office hours.

SAM

Her office hours are on Tuesdays.

AALIYAH

She made an exception.

SAM

Well. Did she have anything to say?

AALIYAH *(lying)*

No. Not really. We just talked about the character study.

SAM

Right.

AALIYAH

I already apologized for upsetting you, I'm not doing it again.

SAM

I'm not asking you to.

AALIYAH

Listen, my mom is in town next week, do you want to meet her?

SAM

Are we doing that?

AALIYAH

I want her to meet you, whether you want to meet her is entirely up to you.

SAM

I mean. Sure. Is she going to like me?

AALIYAH

Not at first.

SAM

Why?

AALIYAH & SAM

Because I'm white.

AALIYAH

You're starting to get it.

SAM

That makes me kind of nervous. I don't know if I'm ready to introduce you to my mom.

AALIYAH

That's alright. I don't need to meet her.

SAM

Like, ever?

AALIYAH

I think I'll need to hear that she's not going to disown you if you do lose the scholarship.

SAM

She's just worried...

AALIYAH

"Worried" doesn't justify what she said to you.

SAM

Maybe you're right.

(A beat. SAM's phone buzzes. He gets an email. AALIYAH turns to him, watches as he reads it.)

SAM

Goddamnit.

AALIYAH

What? What is it?

SAM
Oh my god, I'm fucked.

AALIYAH
They ruled?

SAM
I'm being expelled.

(A beat. AALIYAH goes to SAM.)

AALIYAH
Can I read it?

SAM
Let me just-

AALIYAH
Read the whole thing first, don't just focus on the repercussions, or whatever.

SAM
Don't tell me how to read it.

AALIYAH
Sam-

SAM
“Due to the severity of the racially-charged piece, and its offensive nature, as well as your previous history with maleficence against the university's code of conduct, the Academic Board has opted to both strip you of your scholarship and expel you from the university, effective immediately.”

AALIYAH
I didn't think they would remove you from the term as well.

SAM
Holy shit.

AALIYAH
Hey, hey it's okay. It's going to be okay.

SAM
It's not, Aaliyah! My life is over. This is going to ruin me.

AALIYAH

It's not! It's one thing, you'll go to classes somewhere else. It's going to be okay.

SAM

My mom is going to kill me.

AALIYAH

She's not, she'll understand.

SAM

This is it for me. I won't be able to do any of the things I want to. This is going to be a fucking weight around my neck.

AALIYAH

We can figure this out.

SAM

"We" can't do anything.

AALIYAH

Let's just take a step back here. Why don't we go out for a drink with my friends, forget about all this.

SAM

I can't do that.

AALIYAH

Can you appeal?

SAM

Why does it matter? I'm a racist now! I'm a monster who committed heinous atrocities, and that's how I'll always be known.

AALIYAH

That's not true. I know you aren't that.

SAM

The thing is, you don't. You hardly know me.

AALIYAH

You don't mean that.

SAM

I do. What's your mom going to think now? "The guy I'm sleeping with just got kicked out of school for being a racist". You think she's going to love that?

AALIYAH

So we're just "sleeping together"?

SAM

I didn't mean it like that.

AALIYAH

You need a fucking drink, come on.

SAM (*grabbing his bag to exit*)

Aaliyah, stop! I'm not going out. I need to get out of here.

AALIYAH

No, no, no. Stop that. You're not going anywhere. Okay. Okay.

(*A beat.*)

AALIYAH

Why don't I go out for one drink? I told my friends I'd meet them I don't want to blow them off.

You stay here, and we can figure all this out when I get back.

SAM

I'm so fucking mad. I'm sorry, I know you just want to roll over it, but I'm just, I have to get this out: what am I supposed to write about then?

AALIYAH

What? Why're you focused on that right now?

SAM (*getting increasingly angry until eventually erupting*)

Because it's how I got here! I wanted to write about things that mattered, talk about things that we, what I- care about! Who gets to do that? If I don't, then who does? And where are the rules written down? Huh? Where the fuck is the list of topics I'm allowed to write about, and the things I absolutely can't? Huh? How the fuck am I supposed to know what's off-limits and what's okay? I'm a goddamn artist, I'm a goddamn writer, and I want to be better and I want to be relevant, and I want to add to the conversation but I can't seem to do it without pissing someone off. Just because I'm white? So I can only write for white people? I can't change anything if no one lets me. So why should I bother? Why should I even fucking try? What's the goddamned point! Huh? What do they want from me? Who gets to do it and who doesn't?

(*A beat. AALIYAH doesn't go near him.*)

AALIYAH

Sam-

SAM

I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry. For everything. I didn't mean to wrap you into any of this, but fuck I've been holding that in for awhile.

AALIYAH

I think you should lay down. Try to rest.

SAM

Wait, you're still going?

AALIYAH

Yeah, I promised my friends.

SAM

You're just going to leave me here?

AALIYAH

You're fine. You'll be fine.

SAM

Okay.

AALIYAH

I'll stay for one and come right back.

SAM

Okay.

(AALIYAH moves to SAM. She kisses him. She grabs her purse and heads to the door.)

AALIYAH

I'll be right back.

(AALIYAH exits. SAM stares after her for a while. He picks up his phone. He dials a number. It rings and rings.)

SAM *(leaving a message)*

Hey, Mom. It's me. I need to just tell you. The ruling came back. It's uhm...it's not what we wanted. Not what I wanted. I know it's late but call me back. When you can. So we can, you know, plan. Alright. I'm fine. I'll be fine, I'll be okay. I don't want you to worry. Love you, call me back.

(SAM hangs up the phone. He lays flat on the bed. Scene shifts. PROF. GOODE behind a computer screen. She sends an email.)

PROF. GOODE

Mr. Peterson, Good evening. I wanted to reach out. As you know, I was cc'd on the ruling from the Academic Board. I am sorry to hear the news that you'll be leaving this term. I know it's not what you wanted, but I also know it may be the best course of action for you at this time. I know it may be disheartening at this time: a hard-working students such as yourself being told to step back, examine past actions, and figure out the next best step. And so I hope you might listen to some words of advice: keep going. This world, ever-shifting and ever-evolving, can save a space for you, but only if you claim it now. These small hardships, as monumental as they may seem now, are blips in the greater scheme of life and art. You have what it takes to be an artist, but these moments seek to shape us in ways we can't quite see right now. You will look back on this, one day, hopefully, and see it as the crossroads. The moment you could decide which way to go. The current of life isn't pushing you one way, despite this ruling by a board of your superiors, you are being cut free from it. Forgive me for mixing metaphors, but that's how it should be right now. Take the words they've given you, take this ruling, and use it. Face the fear that this might instill in you. Bring it to the fore front. Work, literally, work your way through it. I know what I describe may seem an impossible task. I know it may feel like the world wants you to stop, to shut up, to stay away. You may feel the urge to do so. You may feel compelled to disappear into this so-called tragedy. But don't. Stay up front. Take it on. Be an artist. I'm here for whatever you may need, if ever. While my course load may fill up (indeed, the course worked so well they've asked me to take on more sections of it). But I would like to be at your disposal, to help continue your learning beyond the relationship that has now been severed. When and if you're ready, I'll be here. Sincerely yours, and in good grace, Roberta. PS- a student from the section was asking about you today. A Ms. Aaliyah Williams. I think she showed some interest in you. I know it may be indecent to state, or even downright inappropriate, but I thought you should know that it appears so folks may miss you. Perhaps she can help you in the future as well.

(Scene shifts. AALIYAH's dorm room. SAM is asleep on the bed. It's late, a few hours later than the previous scene. There is silence for a moment, then we hear the code being entered in the keypad. The code is wrong, the door beeps. The person tries again. The code is wrong again, the door beeps. They try a third time, it's wrong again, and the door buzzes. Finally the person outside knocks, once, twice, then bangs the door. SAM jerks awake. He goes to the door, looks through the peephole. He sighs, opens the door. A drunk AALIYAH stands in the doorway.)

AALIYAH *(trying to whisper)*

Sorry sorry sorry.

SAM

What time is it?

AALIYAH

Late, sorry.

SAM

You said you weren't going to be gone long.

AALIYAH
Things got carried away.

SAM
Get in here, come on, come to bed.

AALIYAH
Did you have fun?

SAM
Why would I have fun?

AALIYAH
I mean what did you do?

SAM
What did I do? Nothing, Aaliyah, I did nothing. I was asleep.

AALIYAH
Okay, sorry, I didn't mean to wake you I just forgot the code.

SAM
This is your room, how did you forget the code?

AALIYAH
I just did.

SAM
Wait. Are you like, really drunk?

AALIYAH
What?

SAM
Oh come on, come to bed.

AALIYAH
Don't judge me. I was celebrating.

SAM
Celebrating?

AALIYAH
I got a job offer today and the girls wanted to buy me shots.

SAM
A job offer?

AALIYAH
Yeah, with Roberta.

Sam
Roberta offered you a job? Today?

AALIYAH
Yeah.

SAM
Was this when you went to her office hours and asked about me?

(A beat.)

SAM
She emailed me. She told me you were asking about me.

AALIYAH
I just wanted to hear her side of it.

SAM
Because you didn't trust my perspective on it all?

AALIYAH
I didn't say that, stop snapping at me.

SAM
I'm not snapping. Let's just go to bed.

AALIYAH
No let's fight.

SAM
What?

AALIYAH
We should fight. That's what couples do when one is drunk and the other one isn't.

SAM
Are we a couple?

AALIYAH
I don't know.

SAM
Come to bed.

AALIYAH
What did you write?

(A beat. SAM is taken aback.)

SAM
Excuse me?

AALIYAH
What did you write? That was so wrong?

SAM
I'm not talking about this right now.

AALIYAH
How come I can't read it?

SAM
Because you can't.

AALIYAH
Because I'll think less of you?

SAM
No-

AALIYAH
Because I'll hate you?

SAM
No! Aaliyah-

AALIYAH
Because then we won't be a couple, right?

(A beat.)

AALIYAH
Let me fucking read it.

SAM
You're being aggressive.

AALIYAH

Oh yeah? Drunk black girl raises her voice and suddenly she's "aggressive". You feel threatened? On edge? You scared of me.

SAM

Stop talking like that, of course not-

AALIYAH

That's how I feel all the time around you.

SAM

You don't know what you're saying.

AALIYAH

I do, I want to read it.

SAM

No you don't.

AALIYAH

Just let me read it, Sam. Fuck.

SAM

Why don't we talk about this in the morning.

AALIYAH

It is the morning, it's 3AM.

SAM

Okay this isn't a joke to me, this is serious. This is a thing that got me expelled.

AALIYAH

That's why it's weird that you don't want me to read it.

SAM

What do you mean?

AALIYAH

Listen I know I'm a little drunk, but I'm actually pretty lucid when I drink, I'm one of those, what do you call it, intellectual drunks? That's why Roberta wants me to be her TA, I'm good in all scenarios.

SAM

She also just likes you.

AALIYAH

Why do you always do that?

SAM

Do what?

AALIYAH

You always diminish my accomplishments! Ever since we met. You've chalked my success up to Roberta "liking" me and not that I put the fucking work in.

SAM

Aaaliyah, babe-

AALIYAH

Ohhhh, we're calling each other babe now!

SAM

I know you work hard. I'm sorry okay? I'm really tired and I just can't do this right now.

AALIYAH

Well we need to do this right now. You need to show me what you fucking wrote. So I can know.

SAM

So you can know what?

AALIYAH

Know you.

SAM

You know me.

AALIYAH

No no no, you said so before, and my girls told me to ask you about it, you said you barely knew me. You said we don't know each other.

SAM

Well I was wrong, okay? I shouldn't have said that.

AALIYAH

You're not getting out of this!

SAM

Out of what?

AALIYAH

Out of showing me! You are going to give me the story, your long form, and you're going to let me read it. We can't move forward, we can't *be* anything until you do. Seriously, Sam. I know I stumbled in here and you write me off as "aggressive" or whatever, but you're going to let me read it. You have to. There's no other option. Otherwise what? You go home, to your mommy or whatever, and you work some dead-end job and I just hold out hope you get into another school nearby? So we can keep fucking and kissing in secret and not meeting each other's parents? So we can just keep coasting, not addressing that the reason we met, the reason we have been doing this whole thing, the reason we can't define what we can't define is because of that story.

Because of what you wrote. This isn't right. And I think you and I both know what's going to happen. We both know what's going to happen after I read it. So we should just do it. We should just get it over with. So that I don't let you be another white person taking my joy. So you can't trap me in another damaging and patriarchal relationship and you can't take another piece of my heart that should go to someone else. So I don't have to keep getting shown time and time again what this society wants from me and expects from me: enslavement. You show me what you wrote so that I can tell you to fuck off. Because we both fucking know what you did.

SAM

I...don't.

AALIYAH

You keep saying that. But you do. Right? I mean, you do. You know what you wrote and why it was wrong, and even though I don't know the specifics or the exact wording, I understand fundamentally what you wrote. (*A beat.*) you know you asked earlier who gets to decide what art we make. You said, basically, that the artist should decide. Regardless of the art, it's up to the artist. That you should decide. But then who holds you accountable? When you fuck up? Because I don't want to do that. And if we stay together, if we go on like this without me reading it, then I'm just taking that on. I won't be doing any fucking justice to what I want to accomplish in this life. And honestly, I don't know how we got this far without you fucking showing me it.

SAM

Aaliyah...I really don't want to lose you.

AALIYAH

Okay, but you don't have me. This relationship, this couple-thing that we have. It's nothing. And here's the thing! Because of that, I won't let you hurt me with what you wrote. I won't. I have not given you the space to hurt me. I haven't put you in any sort of position where your actions can hurt me. You got expelled tonight and I still went and got drinks! You don't affect me. Because you're not my "babe" or my boyfriend. Your some guy. Some white guy. That's it. So give me the fucking story. You're inconsequential.

SAM

I think I'm more than that.

(*A beat.*)

AALIYAH

You just got your ass handed to you. The world is showing you that you're not. You're just another white writer. So right now: I'm the one telling you what you can and can't write. Tomorrow it'll someone else. Years from now: someone else. It's me right now, so show me.

SAM

No. I meant. I'm more to you than that.

AALIYAH (*harsh*)
You're really not.

SAM

Why does it matter? If it's some foregone conclusion that we're ending, that we're breaking up or whatever, why do you need to see it?

AALIYAH
Because I do.

SAM
You sound like Prof. Goode.

AALIYAH
Roberta-

SAM
Fuck why do you call her that!

AALIYAH
Because she asked us to.

SAM
Well you're acting just fucking like her.

AALIYAH
I am her.

SAM
The story isn't important anymore! What's done is done!

AALIYAH
It's important to me!

(A beat. SAM goes to his bag, pulls out a story. He hands it to AALIYAH, goes and sits on the bed. She begins reading, standing in the middle of the room. As she reads, she realizes. She gets to the end, she covers her mouth with her hand shocked. She begins to cry, sobbing, shaking. She tries to compose herself. She turns to SAM.)

AALIYAH
How could you?

SAM
I know. I know.

(They stay like that for a moment. Scene shifts. PROF. GOODE at the lectern. The first day of classes in the new term.)

PROF. GOODE

We now how stories are supposed to end. That's an expectation that we have acknowledged that the "classics" decided for us. And it's truly not something any writer, any writer who is an "other" anyway, has figured out. So we leave that to you. There are conventions, there are archetypes that you can play with. But I don't know if any story has had an original ending since the very first story. Because everything is just a bastardization of that, right? The idea of a story ending at all is, in and of itself, an expectation. It's a convention form which we pull. Beginning, middle, end. Plot. Character. Arc. All things we don't have to follow anymore. Not if we want to do better. Not if we want to change how craft is taught and how craft is designed. Who craft is designed by. In this course, we will challenge you. We will disrupt the norms. You will be pushed to be honest, to try new things, to set new boundaries. And your classmates, as well as myself and your TA, will be the ones to do all that. This workshop, this lecture, is designed by people of color, people who are "others", people who have experienced oppression because of the art of writing. We are all artists. I want to encourage you to start thinking of yourself that way. Call yourself that. Then hold yourself accountable. I promise we will as well. And sometimes it will be uncomfortable. Sometimes it will be harsh. But nothing worth changing ever came without a struggle. So struggle. Give a damn. *(A beat.)* I'm going to hand it over to your TA, Aaliyah, for final remarks, and that'll be that. Aaliyah?

(AALIYAH enters with a stack of papers. She stands at the lectern.)

AALIYAH

All right. I have your bios here. Most of you did very well. Some did not. Read the comments, think of what you can do better. And do better. I want to just add, on a personal note: I've been in your shoes. I've been forced to acknowledge that the way I learned to write was oppressive and self-serving. Tearing people down when it has the power to life people up. I've been torn down, and I've learned to lift up. So, if you ever need me, I'm here for you. I'm here. *(A beat.)* Okay, come and get them.

(Lights down, end of play.)