



WHAT'S

MINE

AND

A Novel

YOURS

NAIMA COSTER

Author of HALSEY STREET

"A ONCE-EVERY-FEW-YEARS READING EXPERIENCE."

—MARY BETH KEANE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Ask Again, Yes*

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NAIMA COSTER



New York Boston

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1

October 1992

A city in the Piedmont of North Carolina

The street was dark when Ray pulled up behind the bakery. The birds sang wild in the trees, the only things astir so early in the morning, the sky a deep and cloudless blue. His little boy, Gee, was asleep in the backseat, neat in his school clothes and fogging up the window with his breath. Ray lifted him out quietly, the keys to the shop jangling in his free hand. They walked around to the front, and the boy was already drooling on him, on his pressed collared shirt, red-and-pink plaid.

"My good luck charm," Ray whispered as he unlocked the gate, holding the boy close.

Superfine stood near the corner of Beard Street, about a mile north of the city square. A neon sign hung out front, the window boxes planted with yellow mums. This part of town used to be where people would fuel up before driving out of the city, or if they were passing through downtown. There was a garage at the end of the block and a gas station where you could pay only in cash. Otherwise, the neighborhood was empty lots, one-story houses, a ballfield the minor league used in the summer. Wildflowers and busted tires swelled out of the plots of land where the old factories were boarded up. But in the past year, a brewing company had

opened in one of the old buildings. They gave tours and served beer in tiny glasses. A lunch window had opened to serve chopped barbecue and hot dogs for a few hours every day. And there was Superfine, which was open from dawn until dusk. They served biscuits and breakfast pastries, coffee, in the morning. At lunch, they sold sandwiches and fresh-baked bread. In the afternoon, they added cookies and lemon bars, slices of chocolate cake. Customers trickled in on their way to work downtown or stopped by to sober up after drunk tours at the brewery across the street. Superfine was cheaper than the coffee stand downtown, and it was the only place this close to get a fresh ham sandwich, a biscuit and peach jam, coffee that didn't taste like hot water and tar mixed together.

It had been Ray's idea to open the shop, although Linette was the one who bankrolled it with the money she got from her husband's life insurance. They knew each other from a job at a coffeehouse an hour away where she had been the manager and he a barista. He'd worked three jobs then, but now Superfine was his everything.

Ray set the boy down on the bench by the windowsill. He ran behind the counter to fetch a bottle of cold coffee from the refrigerator. He dribbled an ounce or two into a glass of milk, stirred it with his finger, and then took it to Gee. He was spread out on the cushions by the window, one arm flung behind his head, the other across his chest, palm flat, as if he were trying to protect himself, to cover up his heart while he slept.

"Morning, my man," Ray whispered. "Drink this," he said, holding the glass to the boy's mouth. Gee would have a longer day than Ray wanted him to. A little caffeine wouldn't hurt him.

"Daddy, why'd you bring me here?"

"Well, it's a big day for me. I thought you could be my helper."

Gee shone at the prospect, sat a little taller in the window.

"Am I still going to school today?"

"We go to school every day," Ray said. "I'll run you over when it's

time. Come on now, let's get you an apron."

They had to fold the apron over twice so it would fit Gee, who was small even for a six-year-old. Gee laughed at the sight of himself in the mirror. He was missing one of his front teeth, a baby tooth he'd chipped so badly they'd needed to get it pulled, but he was still a beautiful boy: brown skinned and brown haired with big hands and feet for his stature. He had a cleft in his chin, and dimples, eyes that watered when he smiled. He had a hoarse whisper of a voice that Ray liked to joke was from talking too much. Gee was a truth teller: he liked to tell about what he saw, and he saw everything. It made Ray nervous that one day the boy would tell the truth about the wrong thing.

They rolled up their sleeves and washed their hands in the sink. Then Ray sat Gee on a stool in the kitchen and told him to turn on the radio. Ray started folding up croissants and sliding them into the proof box. He made pretty knots of dough for the morning buns, sprinkled them with sugar. He explained what he was doing and sometimes asked Gee how much butter he thought he should brush on top of the biscuits, whether the dough had come out of the sheeter smooth. It was the only way he could let Gee help this morning. This was a day that could change their lives—for the shop, for Linette, but most of all for him and Gee and Jade. If business picked up after the story came out, like they hoped it would, Ray had a list of things he'd do—he'd buy Jade a ruby ring and ask her to marry him; he'd buy Gee a set of drawers to keep his things; they'd go on a trip somewhere, like Washington, DC, or Florida. He'd take pictures of Gee in front of the Lincoln Memorial, Jade in front of the cherry blossoms, all of them in front of the castle at the Magic Kingdom—they'd ask a stranger to take the shot, and put Gee in those funny ears.

But first, the reporter, and the feature on Beard Street, the way it was coming back to life. *We've got to steal the show*, Linette had said, and Ray knew she was right. He was making a special just for the day—a devil's food cake doughnut. He'd spent the weekend perfecting the recipe with Gee. What Ray loved about doughnuts was that nobody really needed them. Coffee, you could get hooked

on to the point where you couldn't live without it. But doughnuts—soft, rolled in cinnamon sugar, glazed, dripping with caramel, fat with fruit at the center—had no reason for being. They were his secret power, his mark on Superfine.

Linette arrived at seven a.m., just before they were set to open. Gee was counting out quarters into the register, Ray listing the day's pastries on the chalkboard menu. He had named his doughnut Gee's Devil's Food, which had given the child a thrill.

Linette came in carrying an armload of gardenias in waxed paper. She looked ready for battle. Ray liked to tease her that he'd be an old man before she retired and left him the shop. She drank, on average, six cups of coffee a day, and she never stopped moving. She was all muscle and fat, gray haired, her face painted in a different palette of bright colors every morning. She brought in with her the scent of perfume and hair oil, a pair of shears sticking out of her purse.

"You look tired, Raymond. Didn't you know they were going to take our picture? I was counting on your face to bring in the ladies."

Linette laughed at her own joke, and Gee went running to meet her. He stopped short, waiting for her to react to him, to put her arms around him or pick him up. He could be like this—hesitant—as if he didn't expect to get the things he wanted. Ray didn't like to see him that way.

"Go on and give Ms. Linette a hug," he said. "Say good morning." He measured coffee into the grinder and started the machine.

"What's my big boy Gee doing here?"

"Daddy needed my help." Gee pointed proudly to the sign with the name of his doughnut.

"Devil's food? But you're too sweet. Does that mean this doughnut is going to be too sweet?" Linette sent the boy, laughing, off to wash his hands. When he was out of earshot, she turned to

Ray. "Today of all days?"

"He didn't slow me down, I promise."

Linette shook her head and started putting the gardenias in tiny bloom vases she'd brought along in her purse.

"Doesn't that boy have school today?"

"I won't be gone more than five minutes when I run him there."

"I thought that was his mama's job."

"He's my son, too."

"What are his mama's responsibilities exactly? Or were they done the day she pushed him out and handed him over to you?"

Ray didn't contradict her. He didn't want to fight about Jade this morning.

"That's why I never had children, you know," Linette said. "I didn't want to take care of anyone but myself. I got enough of that when I was young. My mother—"

"Birthed five children, and you raised them all. I know."

Linette liked to tell this story, as if everything there was to know about her had been decided when she was a girl, missing days of school to take care of her siblings and ferry them to the doctor. "Did you ever think that with all the things you do for the two of them all the time, you could be doing something for yourself? You could be taking a class. Getting your degree."

"Why do I need my degree? You're still leaving me Superfine, right? Or are you going to cut me loose, Linette?"

Linette polished the tables in the front room, somber now. "You can't count so much on other people, Ray. Not even me. One day I'm going to die. Everybody dies."

"Well, hold off on dying until after that reporter comes."

Linette smiled and snapped her cleaning rag in Ray's direction. He kissed her on the cheek, triumphant, and started setting the table for just the three of them.

They sat by the window, drinking the fresh coffee, devouring biscuits. The whole shop smelled of devil's food: thick chocolate, sugar, and starch. By seven thirty, the two front girls, Michelle and Michaela, arrived. They fawned over Gee, put on their hairnets, and a feud ensued over what to play on the radio. Linette settled it by

putting on the gospel station, although she wasn't religious. She did it to bring a blessing down on the shop, and all of them. They were all humming along by the time Ray withdrew to the kitchen and left Gee in the window seat, looking forlorn. The boy was one child with him—easy, bright—and another without him.

The shop was full when Jade burst into Superfine, her sunglasses on, her hair folded into a side braid already coming apart at the ends. She was still wearing the gray leggings and Bad Brains T-shirt she'd slept in, underneath a tan trench coat. Gee leapt up to kiss her, and Jade let him and then held him away and asked where she could find Ray.

"Why'd you take him?" she asked as Ray emerged from behind the counter. Her voice was high and thin, and the customers turned in their seats to look at them. "I know how to take care of my son."

Ray took her by the arm and steered her out to the street.

"You all right?"

"My head," Jade said, pressing her fingers to her temples. She didn't explain where she'd been last night, but Ray could figure. There was a restaurant off the freeway that she liked to go to with the girls from her class. They served frozen jack and cokes.

"I had an alarm set. I was ready to take him. But I woke up, and everybody was gone."

"I didn't want him to miss another day of school."

"I would have done it," she said.

Jade pushed her sunglasses up, and he saw last night's eyeliner thick around her downturned eyes. Her nails were painted black, and she was wearing her lace-up boots. How pretty she was, how small, was all the more obvious in her dark, clunky clothes. He'd seen the pictures of her from high school right before she got pregnant with Gee—a black-girl goth who read comic books and hung out with nerds, dreamed about going to punk shows out of town if she could ever find a ride. It was a much older boy who'd gotten her pregnant,

someone at the community college where she was taking a math class. He'd wanted nothing to do with Gee, so Jade lived with her mother until she met Ray and he said to her, *Let's find a place, the three of us.*

Jade stared at him, as if she were thinking of apologizing.

"Did that reporter come by yet?"

Ray could sense her mood shifting. She was penitent, maybe because she wanted him to bake the best he ever had and impress that reporter, or maybe there was no reason at all. Sometimes, Jade was tender, gathering up Ray and Gee in her arms, declaring how lucky she was to have a family that loved her. Other times, she tore through the house, kicking things that were out of place and going on about how she hated living all cooped up, and she hated her dinged-up car, and she hated that Gee was never quiet when she had to study, when she had two hours to sleep before her shift.

"We're just watching the door," Ray said. "He's supposed to come by before three."

"I've got an exam today, too. Drawing blood. I was going to practice on you last night, but I lost track of time."

"You were gonna come home and stick a needle in me even if you couldn't see straight?"

Jade laughed and covered half of her face with her hand. "No, I was going to find your vein. Pretend to stick you."

"You can pretend later. Tonight. You can show me how after you've aced it."

"Why are you so sweet to me, Raymond?"

Ray leaned toward Jade and kissed her. She smelled of the musty couch where she'd fallen asleep, her rose perfume, the cream she rubbed on after a shower, naked in the bathroom, her limbs spread wide. She was all ribs and small breasts, a brush of hair between her legs. Ray groaned a little, without meaning to, thinking of her. They had been missing their time together lately, Jade hard asleep in the mornings before he left for the shop.

Linette could say what she wanted about Jade, but she deserved, at least, some respect. None of her people had gone to school, and here she was, pushing, making a way. Who could blame her if

sometimes she needed a break, to go out and have a few drinks?

Ray kissed her again. "You deserve all the sweet things in life," he said, and went inside to collect Gee. When they returned, Jade had her headphones on, a song roaring in her ears. Ray handed her coffee and a devil's food doughnut, then kissed his boy two, three, four times.

"Come and meet us after your shift. We'll be at Wilson's house. He called for a favor."

"What's he want?" Ray asked.

"Help moving furniture or something."

"He can't ask one of his boys to do that?"

Jade shrugged. "I never ask Wilson questions."

"I don't like you going over there alone."

Wilson lived in a rough corner of the east side, but it wasn't just the neighborhood that bothered Ray. Wilson was the sort of man who lied about the plainest things: how much he'd paid for a microwave, why he'd been fired from his last job. He teased Gee for his missing tooth, slapped Jade's behind to say hello and good-bye. More than once, Ray had run interference for Wilson after he started an argument at a bar. More than once, they'd lent him cash they'd needed themselves. But Jade tolerated him because he was her cousin, and he'd been good to her. He'd bought her beers when she was sixteen, taken her to her appointments when she was pregnant with Gee.

"Did he ask you to bring money? Who else is going to be over there?"

"You worry too much," Jade said, and kissed Ray good-bye. She pulled Gee along by the hand, and the boy leaned into his mother, content to finally have her eyes on him.

Ray watched them walk to the corner. He felt distinctly that he was watching his whole life move away from him: the slender shape of Jade and her mussed hair, Gee's backpack immense on his little body. He wanted to run after them and draw them back, keep them in the shop, where he could protect them. From what? From Wilson? Ray knew it didn't make sense, these urges he got sometimes to hold everything he loved close, the occasional shock of how much he

had to lose. Maybe he was nervous the reporter wouldn't like his doughnuts. Maybe he'd poured himself too many cups of coffee. He moved to follow them, to give Jade another kiss, his boy another squeeze, but he knew it was just nerves. He stayed put. By sundown, they'd all be back at home.

At noon, the reporter still hadn't arrived, and Michaela and Michelle gave up their waiting and left for lunch. Linette sat in her office, a supply closet where she'd installed a fan, a hanging bulb. Ray was alone at the register, watching Beard Street out the windows. The passing traffic was sparse: a truck headed for the highway, the sleek cars pulling up to the lunch window. They wore suits, the people who came from downtown, and Ray had no idea what kinds of jobs they had. A pair of police officers came into the bakery for sandwiches, and a crew of construction workers, Latin American, for coffees. They were tearing down one of the old tobacco factories nearby. Eventually, the mechanic from the garage came in for his weekly sandwich, on the house.

He was close to Ray in age, but he looked much older, a lean man with the beginnings of a paunch at his hips. He had a sunburned brow, a dark mustache, and no beard, and he wore his wavy hair hardened to his head with gel. He came into the shop, wearing aviators and a white polo shirt that somehow wasn't stained with grease.

"White, man? How you going to wear white to work on cars?"

The mechanic laughed. Ray could hardly ever remember his first name, but he usually wore his last name embroidered on the pocket of his uniform: *Ventura*.

"You just got to be careful, man. You need to do it like I do."

He was cocky, which was one of the things Ray liked about him. At first, he'd wondered if Ventura was gay, if he was flirting at him when he winked and bragged and pooched out his lips at him. But he'd learned it was just the way he talked, although Ray wasn't sure

how much of it was because he was Latin and how much of it was because he was from New York.

Once, after work, Ray's car wouldn't start, and he'd walked up the street to the garage to ask if someone could take a look. They told him it would cost fifty bucks to tow the car, even if it was going just to the end of the block. One of the mechanics had agreed to help him push, off the clock, since his shift was over. "It's all right," the mechanic had said, "he's my neighbor," although they'd never seen each other before. He helped Ray get the car in, and the next day, Ray brought him a coffee and a sandwich. After that, the mechanic came by once a week for his lunch.

He handed Ventura his sandwich, a cup of coffee. "The secret is I wear my work shirt over the white," he said. "That way, when I leave the garage, I'm looking nice."

Ray shook his head. "Out here? For what? There ain't nobody out here."

Ventura laughed and gestured at the two of them, as if they were enough of a reason. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his jeans and waved them in the air.

Linette surfaced from the back, as if she had read their minds. "You're due for a break, Ray. Go on and take your lunch, just don't go too far."

"Yes, ma'am," Ray said, and he and Ventura hurried out like boys given leave to go and play.

They went around to the back of Superfine and lit up.

"I'm buying a house. I told you?" Ventura said. "Out by the forest. We're going to be living in the trees." He smiled, all his good teeth gleaming, a gold chain visible underneath the collar of his shirt. Ventura always looked sharp. "My wife is packing us up right now."

"You've got two girls, right?"

"Three. My youngest had her first birthday a few months ago. You only got the one, right?"

Ray hadn't bothered to explain about Gee, so he nodded.

"It's crazy, man. I thought I loved my wife—I do. But you'd do anything for your kids. It's like something changes in your brain. They climb in there and take over. They're the ones in charge. They

don't know it, but they are."

Ray figured there was no point in saying it wasn't automatic. Something in him had been reordered when he met Gee because he'd let the boy come in and rearrange everything. But it hadn't happened with his own parents: his father, who'd left him with his mother, or his mother, who left him to watch the kids she babysat, returning once in a while to drop off juice and chips and hot cereal, until she didn't return at all, and Ray went to live with his grandmother until she died. He was twenty by then, and he met Jade waiting in line at the DMV. She was getting her first driver's license, Gee nodding off on her chest, and she looked too skinny to be someone's mother, her teeth pretty and wide and set apart, and Ray was there to change his last name. He figured he didn't want anything in common with his mother, his father, so he took on his grandmother's first name as his last, Gilbert, from Gilberta, and Jade thought it was funny. If he wanted to honor his grandmother, why change her name into a man's name? "If you're going to do it, you might as well do it all the way," she'd said, and he'd known then that was how she lived her life, whether she was drinking or studying or screwing a college boy, or giving her opinion on a band or an election or how much sugar Ray put in her coffee. He'd seen quickly that he wanted to live just like that, *all the way*, with her.

Ventura went on about the house. "It's on the north side of the county. Feels like the country. There's too much crime around here. I thought New York was bad. But every time you read the paper, there's some kid who moved down here from the Bronx because his moms thought it would be safer, and he winds up dead." Ventura fired an imaginary gun with his hand.

Ray nodded. He had heard more than one story like that.

"You get a good deal on the house?"

"Almost nothing down, can you believe it? It's not like I thought. They only care if you can make the payments on time." Ventura squinted at the sun, running his tongue over his bottom lip. "You know, nobody in my family has ever owned anything. Not in Colombia, not here. But now I have something to leave for my kids."

Ray laughed. "Everybody's talking about dying today. You got a

disease I don't know about or something?"

"You think about it, man," Ventura said. "You see the next generation, and you remember we're on the way out. We got to leave them something to hold on to when we're gone."

"Yeah." Ray nodded. "Memories. Good times."

Ventura dragged on his cigarette, shook his head. "You can't live in good times, man. You can't live inside a memory. You need a deed with your name on it."

They could see downtown from the back of the shop, the compact cluster of brick buildings, the water tanks, a few newer towers made of glass. Beyond the city, to the north, rose a bank of longleaf pines. Even farther, the state park surged with trees blushing rose and yellow.

Ray told Ventura about the reporter.

"Then you should be thinking about a house. Start saving. Don't you live on the east side?"

"My whole life," Ray said.

Ventura shook his head. "You got to be thinking about schools. If your boy stays on the east side, his future will be over before it starts."

Ray shrugged. School was the least of his worries for Gee. The boy was quick. He'd be fine anywhere, as long as he got what both Ray and Jade had been missing: two parents, a peaceful home. That's why Ray was always working on Jade. More than once, in a rage, she'd told him she was too smart for her life. What haunted Ray wasn't the meanness of it, but the truth.

"I'm telling you," Ventura said. "If there's something I've learned in this country, it's that your address decides everything. You've got to get out."

"Maybe," Ray said. Ventura had made the long journey from the country where he was born to New York to North Carolina. Why shouldn't he be able to get to the other side of town, if he set his mind to it?

Ventura drained his cup. "Life is funny. One day, you're in the mountains picking coffee beans. Another day, you're here, drinking coffee, with an American wife and a house."

“I know what you mean,” Ray said. He didn’t own a home, but he knew how he felt. One day, you’re a boy, home alone, giving a stranger’s baby your finger to suck on, and the next, you’re a man, with a boy of your own, waiting for a reporter to come and put your picture in the paper.

“If we ever get a house, maybe we can have you all over,” Ray said. “For dinner or something.”

It surprised Ray to say it—he and Jade weren’t the entertaining type, but maybe they would be, if they lived in a house. Ventura picked up the idea quickly. He smiled and snuffed out his cigarette on the concrete, working his way up to whatever slick line he was planning to deliver to send Ray laughing and seal their fifteen minutes of smoking and standing together, before they both went back to work.

“All right, Ray,” he said. “But I want some real food. Don’t make us no sandwiches.”

By two thirty, the reporter hadn’t arrived, and Ray was getting listless. He had been working nearly ten hours, Michaela and Michelle had left to pick up their kids, and Linette called the paper but couldn’t get through.

“Maybe they got backed up,” she said.

The shop was empty, in the lull before the after-work crowd came by. Linette said one day this would be their busiest time: when people came in for afternoon coffee and lingered. Women who stayed home with their kids, people who got days off, the university students. They just didn’t know about Superfine yet, but they would. They’d be better than Starbucks, and there was no Starbucks opening in town anytime soon. If there was something Ray admired about Linette, it was that she wasn’t afraid to dream, once you showed her she wouldn’t be doing all the dreaming alone.

Ray called Jade from the phone in the back to ask about her test.

“I got a one hundred at least,” she said.

"That's my girl. How's that headache?"

"I helped Wilson put everything out in the yard—he's selling all his furniture. I want to lie down, but I'm fixing to get Gee."

"Let me get him. Nothing's going on over here."

"You sure?"

"I'll bring you another doughnut. There's a lot left over."

Jade softened, as if she knew it hurt his feelings to say out loud that his doughnuts hadn't sold like he hoped they would. "Bring me two," she said, and hung up.

He was waiting for the engine to warm up when Linette came bounding out the back door.

"He's coming!" she called. "A reporter and a photographer. They'll be here in half an hour."

"They starting with us?"

"I don't know."

Ray made to turn off the car, but then he thought of Jade and her headache. The truth was he didn't need his picture in the paper, as long as the bakery made it in, some line about the goodness of everything he'd made. He told Linette that Jade and Gee were waiting on him.

"But I need you here."

"I'll be quick," Ray said. Wilson's house was no more than five minutes from Gee's school, which was ten minutes from Superfine on the highway. Fewer, if he hustled. "I'll be right back, Linette—you'll see."

Ray yanked out of the lot and sped toward the highway.

Gee was waiting in front of the school with his teacher. Ray signed the checkout clipboard and caught the boy up in his arms. He settled into the backseat, and Ray told him to buckle up, the reporter was coming, and they had to rush.

Wilson lived in a neighborhood of battered brick ranch houses with empty, overgrown lawns. At least where he and Jade lived had signs of life: bicycles underneath the porches, plastic slides in the yard. And, still, it was nothing like the west side, where the houses had deep porches, ivory-white pillars, flower gardens. The apartment Jade and Ray lived in was an old millhouse that had

belonged to tobacco workers. He had been told the east side was once a nice place to live before the factories closed and the city hollowed out, only the west side left intact. Maybe Ventura had the right idea, buying a house along the edge of the county. Maybe a house would satisfy Jade more than a ruby ring, a trip to Florida.

Ray looked at Gee in the rearview mirror. "What do you think about living in a house one day? One that's really ours?"

"Our house isn't ours?"

Ray didn't want to explain about rent and mortgages, and he wasn't sure he knew how it all worked himself. But he wanted his boy to understand.

"When a house is yours, nobody can take it away. It's mine, and then one day, it passes on to you. It has your name on it. You know what a legacy is?"

Ray turned onto Wilson's street and put the car in park. He wanted to go on talking to Gee, but he knew he had no time. He turned to tell his boy to run up to the house, when he saw Jade and Wilson in the yard, talking to a man in a dark blue sweatshirt. His back was to the street, so Ray couldn't see his face. He was hardly moving but Ray could tell something was wrong. Jade had her finger pointing at the man and she was yelling. Wilson had his hands stuffed in his pockets, and his face too nonchalant, like he was doing his best not to explode.

"You stay in the car," Ray said and unlocked the door.

"Daddy?"

Ray turned to face his boy. "You pay me mind," he said more sternly. Gee nodded. He sat up taller in his seat, strained to peer out the window.

Ray handed him the box of doughnuts. "I'll be right back," he said more softly, and scaled fast up the lawn.

Jade said his name as soon as she saw him, and the man in blue turned around. He had a pale face, a toothpick dangling out the side of his mouth. He slit his eyes at Ray and said, "Who the fuck is this? Did you call somebody?" He pointed his finger at Wilson, who was tapping his foot against the ground. He was either agitated or scared. Jade was both, Ray could see. He went and stood beside

her.

“What’s going on?” he said. He was still wearing his apron, but he made himself look broad, his voice low.

“Your cousin owes me money. Selling all this furniture isn’t going to make you enough to pay me back. And I’m tired of waiting.”

“I already told you, I don’t have it on me,” Wilson said.

The man in blue shook his head. “Then I’m here to take you to the bank where you can get it. Or I’m taking *her* to the bank—” He nodded at Jade. “I don’t care who it is. Somebody is going to pay me my money today.”

He was shouting, and Ray wanted to take Jade, put her in the car, drive her and Gee back to Superfine, but he knew he couldn’t. This man wouldn’t let them off, he could see, and, if they weren’t careful, it would come to a fight. He didn’t want to fight him, not with Gee in the car. The little boy had his face to the window, his hand on the glass.

“How much does he owe you?” Ray asked. The man said the number, and Ray shook his head. “I can’t help you with that.”

“Then maybe she can,” the man in blue said, and he took a step toward Jade.

Ray put his arm around her, even if it didn’t make sense, even if he should keep his hands free. She was looking away from the three of them, toward the car, watching their son.

“That’s enough,” Wilson said finally. “Let’s go to the bank. Just leave my cousin out of this.” He inched his hand around his back.

“What are you doing?” the man in blue shouted at him. “Hey, man, what you doing?”

Before Wilson could answer, the man pulled out a gun, held it straight up to his face. Jade gasped, and Ray took her by the shoulders, pushed her hard behind him, but all the man in blue saw was Ray moving. He turned the gun toward him and shot.

His daddy had told him not to move from the car, and Gee didn’t mean to disobey, but his body started going all on its own. He was running up the lawn. His mother was slumped

over, like she'd been knocked down, too, and she was screaming. There were doors opening down the street, but Gee couldn't turn to look—his eyes were set on his father, fallen down, like he had been playing a game where one moment he was up, and the next, he was splayed out. Gee wedged himself between the grown-up bodies to kneel next to his daddy. He felt his mother lifting him away. He fought and kicked to stay close. She lost her grip on him, and he sank nearer to him, the one he loved. He used his hands to pinch his father's shoulders, his pretty ironed shirt, his favorite, red-and-pink plaid. Gee shook him, called out to him, but he stayed still. He stuck his hand underneath his daddy's body, to prop him up, so he could hear. *Daddy*, he said. *Daddy*. When his hand came back to him, it was shining with blood.