

ONE

Seven inches of snow fell overnight, making the neighborhood appear pristine. Forecasters called for rain but Mother Nature always reigns. Cars traveling to Manhattan progress at abnormally slow speeds along the Belt Parkway. Jessica's alarm goes off, and she hears the newscaster report there are no accounts of accidents throughout the metropolitan New York area.

Jessica pushes herself up on her pillow and yawns. "It's time for me to rise. I have a big day ahead of me."

Laurel Heights, Queens, has been Jessica's neighborhood since she was the age of seven. Before moving to Laurel Heights Jessica and her family lived in public housing in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Jessica's father was content living in substandard housing. Jessica's mother earned her teaching license. Her mother's increased income disqualified Jessica's parents from remaining in the projects.

Thirteen years ago, when Jessica first moved to Laurel Heights, the neighborhood was much different from its condition today. The brick homes had manicured lawns, the pavement was black, the sidewalks were intact, and the neighborhood was safe. Neighborhood residents were mainly Jewish and Anglo-Saxon. When Jessica's parents moved into their home, they were one of three African Americans who lived on their block.

Businesses up the block on the major thoroughfare, Springland Boulevard, flourished. There was a Jewish deli, a magazine and newspaper shop, an appliance repair shop, a grocery store, a Chinese restaurant, a bank, a meat market, Woolworth's, a drugstore, and a shoe repair shop.

Jessica and her siblings fit right into the neighborhood, because when they were in elementary school, they were bussed from their neighborhood school to a school that was more challenging. Students were mainly Jewish and Anglo-Saxon. Two students invited Jessica to their homes. One friend invited Jessica to a day outing at Jones Beach. On that day Jessica learned that she could tan just like her Jewish friend. Jessica also learned what she wanted for herself by going into the homes of her friends.

Laurel Heights today is much different than it was over a decade ago. On Jessica's block of twenty homes four families are Anglo-Saxon and sixteen are African American. The Jewish businesses up the block are gone. The owner of the magazine and newspaper shop was shot to death at

his shop and his store was set on fire. Storefronts are boarded up. Gates to protect businesses after hours are visible on most businesses. Police officers walk the beat.

Jessica has witnessed the change and she wants no part of it. She has decided to choose a career so she can live where she wants in a place with no chance of community decay. Jessica has chosen a career in dentistry. Jessica's mother has told her that her great-grandmother supported herself and five children without a man.

Jessica's mother grew up without a father and experienced multiple evictions as a child. Jessica chose her career because she wants to be self-sufficient and she wants a husband who she can give her life and love to. If he chooses to leave, Jessica is making sure she can support herself.

Jessica is dressed and descends the stairs on her way to the kitchen to get breakfast. She meets her older brother, John, Jr., and her younger sister, Janine, in the kitchen.

"J.J. and Janine, top of the morning to you both. What's for breakfast?"

"You're in a good mood, Jessica. What gives?"

"I've told Janine, because we women have to stick together, but I haven't told you, J.J. If I tell you, will you make my breakfast?"

"Well, since I'll just be adding milk to your cereal, I will make your breakfast. Now tell me." J.J. feels coerced by Jessica again.

Jessica ponders whether she should give all the details or trim them. Since Janine is present Jessica will tailor her story. "J.J., Eric and I will be going on a romantic date tonight."

"What do you mean by romantic, Jessica?"

"Janine, romantic suggests love between a man and a woman."

"Jessica, you won't be a full-fledged woman until nine more months."

"A girl can dream, J.J. Anyway, after classes today Eric and I will officially become a couple. You know, when Eric and I first met, I could see him only as a friend. I didn't feel he was my type."

"What exactly is your type, Jessica?"

"J.J., just think of Ian."

Ian was Jessica's first boyfriend. Jessica and Ian had met at the neighborhood grocery store up the block. Ian was well-mannered and light skinned, and had a killer afro. He was tall and dressed nicely, and had luscious lips. In later years Jessica could not understand how her parents had trusted the two of them.

After Ian had spent time with Jessica in the presence of her parents and it was time for Ian to go, the two would go to the foyer. The foyer occupied the space between the front door and the living room. A door separated the living room and the foyer. Ian and Jessica would kiss without either parent checking on them. They would kiss for at least thirty minutes.

"I often thought of Ian as mine before you stole him from me. Jessica, I had eyes for him too."

"Janine, I had no control over who Ian wanted. Plus, he wasn't your age."

"Oh, Jessica. Momma left this message for you."

"Thanks, J.J. What does it say?"

"Since you can't read, let me read it to you."

"I can read. Give me that message." Jessica grabs the message from J.J.'s hand. The message reads:

Jessica, good luck and have a wonderful night. Please remember your curfew, sweetheart.

Momma

"Thank you, J.J. I'm about ready for my breakfast."

As a young child, Jessica found reading boring. She preferred playing outside with her friends. Jessica's mother tried methods she used on her own students to motivate and stimulate that part of the brain that enables one to read. At one time Jessica's mother believed the brain can develop and train like a muscle to cause a person to love reading. Jessica caused her mother to reevaluate her belief. However, when Jessica was in the seventh grade, she finally understood the need to change.

Seventh-grade students have to pick a high school of their choice. New York City has a vast selection of specialized high schools. For example, Brooklyn Technical High School has a curriculum for students who wish to be architects or engineers.

To qualify for specialized high schools, students' reading and math levels must be two grades higher than they are in. Jessica had a ninth-grade math level but a seventh-grade reading level. She did not qualify to take the test for a specialized high school and had to go to the high school in her district.

Richard Nelson High School was her only choice. Many students belonged to gangs. Reports of many fights caused fears in her. Jessica's mother also had fears about her daughter attending Richard Nelson. Jessica's mother tried to help her. Her mother took Jessica to a private school in Jamaica, Queens.

Once they arrived at the private school Jessica had to take an assessment exam. The examiner explained that the exam consisted of multiple-choice questions. He read the sample question below and told Jessica this is an analogy.

Hand is to man as _____ is to horse.

- (a) paw
- (b) claw
- (c) hoof
- (d) foot

The correct answer to the sample question was hoof. Jessica asked the examiner, "What is a hoof?" Jessica's inability to answer the easy sample question stunned the examiner. He looked at her with sorrowful but caring eyes.

Although the examiner did not make Jessica feel stupid, she felt stupid within her soul. Jessica's humiliation was the straw that broke the camel's back. There would no longer be mediocrity for her. That moment she resigned within herself that she would no longer accept anything less than excellence in her academic performance. That moment she understood the importance of reading. Jessica attended Richard Nelson and steered clear of the troublemakers.

"Thanks for breakfast, big bro. What time is your first class?"

"Don't worry, sis. I'm taking Janine to school today. So you can go and do whatever you need to do to prepare for tonight."

"Thanks, my brother. Janine, I'll take you to school on Monday. Do you agree to that?"

“Yes, Jessica.”

“Oh, I wanted to ask you both what you want to do for your father’s birthday.”

“Why do you say it like that, Jessica? Your father. He’s your father too.”

“I asked you both the question because I was hoping you would do nothing for him. Have you forgotten what Momma has to go through every day? I pray daily that she doesn’t trip and fall and that God protects her good eye.”

“Jessica, forgive him. He said he was sorry.”

“Janine, sorry doesn’t cut it. Let’s just forget about Daddy for now and get ourselves to school.”

J.J. puts his arm around Jessica as they gather their belongings. They don their boots, coats, scarves, hats, and gloves. The threesome leaves the house. Janine and J.J. walk Jessica to her car. She gets in her car. Jessica waits until she sees J.J. and Janine get in his car. Then Jessica slowly pulls off in the snow.

Jessica’s parents divorced in her first year at Columbia. Mr. John Euge and Mrs. Cynthia Euge should never have married. But God thought differently. John and Cynthia met in church. When Jessica’s parents started dating, her father was dating another young lady. John enlisted in the army. His first foreign assignment was in Korea. John loved this other young lady. Cynthia was nothing but a plaything to John.

Unfortunately, Cynthia became pregnant. Cynthia’s mother threatened John if he did not marry Cynthia; she would inform the army resulting in a dishonorable discharge. John evaluated his alternatives. He wrote a letter to his true love asking her to marry him, but he did not hear from her. So he married Cynthia.

The letter John sent to the other woman had somehow gotten lost in the mail. His love received the letter after many months following his wedding. The young lady found out John’s location and sent her response. She said yes. John has never recovered from the loss of his dream with his true love. John took his frustrations out on Cynthia.

From a young age Jessica was well aware that her parents were having marital problems. They argued often. When Cynthia would ask

John to lower his voice when they were disputing, John would turn on the stereo and play one of his calypso albums at the highest volume.

This usually happened when neighbors, Jessica, and her siblings were asleep. And at times her parents' arguments would intensify into John's physically abusing Cynthia. John's behavior made the family unwelcome neighbors. One of the Euge's Jewish neighbors moved out of the neighborhood quickly after Jessica's family moved in. Jessica is sure her neighbors had never experienced anything like her father. His behavior worsened when he imbibed alcohol.

After years of mental and physical abuse Cynthia finally decided to divorce John. Cynthia decided based on the testimony of Jessica's and Janine's account of sexual abuse. Jessica was livid when her mother suggested counseling as a way to amend the marriage. When the police served Jessica's father with divorce papers, she describes his behavior as a meltdown.

John was studying to become a lieutenant in the New York City Fire Department. He had been studying for months. John asked Cynthia to please wait to have the papers served until after his exam. Cynthia initially agreed. However, when she thought about his request and what he had done to their daughters, Cynthia found it necessary to have the papers served before John's exam.

Jessica and her siblings awoke to their father yelling at their mother, "You reneged on the contract." John kept repeating it as Cynthia begged him to stop yelling in her ear. John continued to yell. Jessica and her siblings ran downstairs to help in some way. They begged their father to stop but he would not. John pinned Cynthia against the refrigerator. She had no escape. John had keys in his hand and positioned one key just so. John punched Cynthia in the eye with the key.

Cynthia was hospitalized and John was jailed. Cynthia dropped the charges after John spent one day in jail because her main concern was giving John the opportunity to work to financially provide for their children.

The doctors could not save Cynthia's eye. This was Jessica's turning point when it came to loving her father. She officially hated him. The day of discharge from the hospital Cynthia feared returning to their home. This tragedy separated the family. J.J. and John stayed in their house. A cousin took in Cynthia, Jessica, and Janine. It was there that Cynthia regained her physical and emotional strength.

Cynthia appeared in family court with a patch over her left eye to settle the divorce. The divorce settlement awarded Cynthia the house, child support, and alimony. John left their home and moved in with his mother in Brooklyn. Cynthia wanted all of her children together, but she still feared living in their home. Jessica, Janine, J.J., and Cynthia could not stay at their cousin's house because of space restrictions.

Jessica's friend's mother knew of a woman who she felt could help. This woman opened her home to four strangers. The name of this precious lady is Aunt Anita. They stayed with Aunt Anita for many months. Shortly after the Euge family moved in with Aunt Anita, Jessica graduated from high school.

Jessica's explanation as to why Cynthia put up with John is that Cynthia did not want her children to go through what she went through when her father abandoned her mother.

Jessica is a pre-dental student in her last semester at Columbia University. After the humiliation felt at that private school in Jamaica, Queens, Jessica became an honor student at Richard Nelson High School. She became more outgoing and joined the cheerleading squad, the math team, the biology squad, and the photography club.

Third in her graduating class, colleges and universities sought after Jessica. She had no shame in explaining to her interviewers her family problems prior to her parents' divorce. Jessica made it clear that even though she had come from a maladjusted family, she had risen above the confusion. She also told the interviewers the truth about how she had become a voracious reader following years of mediocre performance on reading tests.

Jessica's first interview for dental school is at Columbia University. Interviewers for the College of Dental Medicine will hold interviews at the undergraduate college. Jessica's instructor excused her from her physical chemistry class to attend the interview. She will have to make up the work. Jessica's friend, Eric, will let her copy his notes and tell her of any homework assignments.

The interview is at 11:00 a.m. Jessica has planned accordingly. She removed her snow gear and placed it in her duffel bag. Jessica's black dress suit, black stockings, black heels, and jewelry were in her garment bag before she dressed. Jessica's black purse sits on the locker room bench as she checks herself in the mirror.

“Well, girl, I must look out for numero uno. Columbia should be my first choice but I won’t decide until I’m interviewed and accepted at . . .”

Someone enters the locker room. It’s Jessica’s best friend.

“Sister, are you talking to yourself again?”

“Lynda, just be happy I don’t reply to myself. I can’t go crazy, especially today.”

“I just came in to see you in clothes other than khakis, a sweater, and boots. And to wish you good luck. You look beautiful, Jessie.”

“Thank you, Lynda. If I tell you something, do you promise not to tell anyone?”

“Of course, Jessie. What’s on your mind?”

“Lynda, my first choice in dental schools is Howard University.”

“Jessie, I won’t tell anyone, but YOU ARE CRAZY. Columbia is an Ivy League university. Is Howard an Ivy League? No.”

“Don’t you turn your nose up at Howard University College of Dentistry. If I use my same study habits, I can get just as good a dental education at Howard as I would at Columbia. The curriculum of dental schools throughout the US is identical. I can tell you one trademark Howard has that Columbia doesn’t.”

“Tell me, Jessie.”

“Howard has a dental student body made up of a majority of African American males. In fact, I will bet you the current freshman dental class at Howard has more African American males than Columbia University’s dental school population of African American males over the past decade.

Now I’m talking about in the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior classes. That is, all four classes over the past decade.”

“Jessie, I’m not going to bet you. I believe what you say is true. I just don’t think the education at Howard even compares with Columbia. Have you forgotten about Eric?”

“Eric plans on staying in New York. I have to consider where the best opportunities are for me. Men do the same all the time. I love Eric but we are not married.”

“Jessie, I have to say that I don’t believe what I’ve heard since I walked into this locker room.”

“You know me, Lynda. My sign is Libra. So I’m honest to a fault. Eric knows that I want to go to Howard.”

“But does he know why, Jessie?”

“I can’t tell him I want to explore the male African American cream of the crop from the US and males from various countries.”

“Why are you concerned with meeting anyone else if you love Eric?”

“That’s right. I do love Eric. You know what is in store for us this evening.”

“Yes, I do and that is my point exactly.”

“Listen, Lynda. You know me. I’m just going to play my relationship with Eric by ear. I love Eric and I don’t want to lose him. Maybe I won’t get accepted to Howard. Who knows if I would get accepted at Columbia? As with all difficult decisions, I place the outcome of my and your concerns in the hands of the Lord.”

“You are so wise, Jessie. I want only the best for you, girl.”

“Thanks, Lynda. Well, I’d better make my way to the Dean’s Office. I want to arrive fifteen minutes early to clear my mind. I reviewed some generic questions. However, the interviewers may ask any question.”

“Don’t worry, Jessie. Just answer the questions truthfully.”

“I will, Lynda.”

Jessica and Lynda hug and say their good-byes. Jessica picks up her purse as she exits the locker room. Lynda walks to her locker and removes her snow gear.

Jessica ascends in the elevator to the fourth floor. The elevator doors open to the hallway. Mahogany double doors with intricate gold handles remind Jessica of the last time she met with the dean.

On a genetics exam one multiple-choice question had two possible answers. Jessica chose one of the answers, but the instructor marked her answer wrong. She took the textbook to the instructor to show him that her answer was correct. The instructor failed to change her answer. That made

the difference between Jessica's getting a B and getting an A. Jessica took the matter to Dean Bernard.

After Dean Bernard heard Jessica's case he said, "Jessica, two points will not change your excellent GPA by much. You are an honor student and this is your last semester. Your GPA is close to a 4.0. If you had a 4.0, I could understand your concern.

You will graduate with honors and will probably be accepted to all the schools to which you apply. Face it, Jessica. Life is not fair. Cut your losses and focus on your long-standing goal, that is, acceptance into the dental school of your choice."

Jessica stressed over the principle of the injustice for weeks after talking with Dean Bernard. Eventually Jessica took his advice and cut her losses.

Jessica takes a deep breath and enters the Dean's Office. Mrs. Julien, administrative assistant to the executive secretary, greets Jessica.

"Good morning, Jessica."

"Good morning, Mrs. Julien. I arrived a little early to get my mind together."

"I understand how you feel, dear. Don't be nervous. The members of the Admissions Committee are kind. The committee was so considerate to come to the undergraduate school to interview Columbia students. Most universities hold interviews in the dental school. The Admissions Committee will hold interviews here for the remainder of the week."

"That is considerate of them, Mrs. Julien. Is there a student in the meeting room now?"

"Yes, there is, Jessica."

"Can you tell me who is being interviewed now?"

"Jessica, you'll see when the student exits the meeting room."

"I see. Well, I'm going to step outside for a few minutes."

"Take your time. You have at least ten minutes before your interview."

Jessica walks through the mahogany doors into the hallway. She leans against the wall, lowers her head, closes her eyes, and softly prays: "Dear Lord, this day has finally come. I trust You will lead me in making the right decision. You know my first choice. If I am accepted at Howard, I will use my dental skills and license to Your glory.

Please don't let the committee ask me which dental school is my first choice. I don't want to lie. If the committee does pose the question, I ask for Your forgiveness in advance. Well, they should be calling me soon. I find comfort in the fact that You are always with me. I love you, God. Amen."

Jessica reenters the Dean's Office and takes a seat. A student exits the meeting room and closes the door behind him.

"Hi, Peter. How did it go?"

"Hi, Jessica. I was a bit nervous at first but the interviewers were all laid back. I relaxed pretty quickly. So you have nothing to worry about. Just answer their questions honestly."

"I will do that, Peter. How long did your interview last?"

"I'd say about forty-five minutes to an hour."

"Thanks for the info, Peter. I hope you get in."

"Thanks, Jessica. I'll see you around."

"Bye, Peter."

Jessica gathers her thoughts. She rises from her seat and gets a cup of cold water from the water dispenser. Jessica drinks the water hurriedly and returns to her seat.

"You're next, Jessica. I have no doubt about your acceptance into Columbia College of Dental Medicine."

"Thank you, Mrs. Julien."

"You are welcome, Dr. Euge."

"I like the way that sounds, Mrs. Julien."

The meeting room door opens and a woman walks out.

"I presume you are Miss Jessica Euge."

"Yes, I am Jessica Euge." Jessica stands.

Mrs. Julien gives Jessica a thumbs up. Jessica follows the woman into the meeting room. She sees three men seated at an oblong Cherrywood conference table with matching banker's armchairs. An armless version of the interviewers' chairs faces the Admissions Committee. The woman asks Jessica to take a seat. Jessica sits as the woman takes her seat. The woman begins.

“Jessica, my name is Dr. Waldron. I am the chairperson of the Admissions Committee. To my left is Dr. Chung Li. To his left is Dr. Lazar and to his left is Dr. Barbier.”

They individually welcome Jessica and she thanks them for considering her. Dr. Waldron thanks Jessica for applying to Columbia’s dental school and remarks about how impressive Jessica’s transcript and DAT scores are. Jessica thanks Dr. Waldron.

“Okay, Jessica. Let’s get started. As you know, our Admissions Committee will ask you questions. Each committee member will ask you two questions. We have broken down your questions into four categories. The sections are questions about yourself, questions about your dental school goals, dental school questions, and finally, current issues/scenario questions. Do you have any questions thus far?”

“Yes, Dr. Waldron. I don’t understand how I can answer dental school questions before attending dental school.”

“That’s a good point, Jessica. One does not have to have attended dental school to answer these questions. Let me give you an example. One question may be why do you want to attend Columbia College of Dental Medicine?”

“I understand, Dr. Waldron. Thank you for the example.”

“You are welcome, Jessica. Now, at the end of our questioning the floor is yours to express anything you wish. That will conclude your interview. You will hear from the Admissions Committee in six to eight weeks by certified mail.”

“Thank you for your thorough description of what I can expect. I also want to thank you for the name plates before each of you.”

“You are welcome, Jessica. Well, are you ready?”

“Yes, I am ready, Dr. Waldron.”

“We will start with Dr. Barbier’s questions and work our way to the right, ending with my questions to you.”

“I understand, Dr. Waldron.”

Dr. Barbier starts. “Miss Euge, I will ask you a couple of questions about yourself. The first question is where do you see yourself in five years and ten years?”

“Dr. Barbier, in five years I see myself in a general practice residency. Although I will have gained an excellent education, nothing will

compare with treating patients on a larger scale in a hospital. I want my dental knowledge to expand. I want to see firsthand conditions I've only read about and seen pictures of in my textbooks.

In ten years I see myself either in my own private practice or as an associate of a very successful and established dentist."

"Based on your ten-year goals, which alternative would you prefer and why?"

"I would choose private practice because I am one who feels most comfortable when I control my destiny. I would set my office hours based on my needs. I wouldn't have to answer to anyone because I would be the owner of the business."

"Would you say dentistry is a business or a practice?"

"Dr. Barbier, I would say dentistry is a business and a practice."

"Dr. Barbier, you have asked Jessica three questions in one. Let's move on to the second question."

"I'm sorry, Dr. Waldron and Miss Euge. Who are the three most influential people in your life, Miss Euge?"

"Dr. Barbier, I'd have to say the three most influential people in my life are my great-grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. I have never met my great-grandmother but her spirit of financial independence lives on in my heart. My great-grandmother had her own business and supported five children in grand style without the financial support of a man.

My grandmother is my spiritual mentor. She attended church every Sunday. My grandmother watched only Christian television and listened to only Christian radio. She read scriptures and prayed in my presence. She led me to accept Jesus. From the day I accepted Christ I have God and Jesus to lean on, especially during difficult times.

Last, but not least, my mother is my educational mentor. My presence at Columbia is a testament to my mother's influence. My mother taught me and my siblings that education can change one's socioeconomic level more reliably than any other method. My mother has a bachelor's and two master's degrees. She earned two master's degrees here at Columbia."

"That is wonderful, Jessica. Now we know who you received your intelligence from. Do you have anything to add?"

"No, that's all, Dr. Barbier."

“Do you need water or anything, Jessica?”

“No, thank you, Dr. Waldron. I’m fine.”

“Then we will continue with questions from Dr. Lazar.”

“Thank you, Dr. Waldron. Miss Euge, do you prefer to be called Miss Euge or Jessica?”

“I don’t mind if everyone calls me Jessica.”

All members of the committee agree to do so.

“Jessica, the following questions involve your dental school goals. What did you do to prepare for the DAT?”

“I first prepared for the DAT by asking a few freshman dental students how they prepared for the DAT. Three out of four students said they took the Stanley Kaplan course. I took the advice of the three students and enrolled in the course.”

“Yes, Jessica. The course paid off and your scores are the proof. Your second question is do you believe you have the ability to undertake the study and work involved in dental school? If you do, why?”

“Dr. Lazar, I do believe I have what it takes. I am blessed to know two dentists in private practice. One dentist is my friend’s father and the other is my mother’s friend. I have visited their offices to see what the practice of dentistry involves.

I have also asked them questions about their dental school experiences. Their stories make me aware that dental school will be difficult and challenging. But I believe my spirit of determination will not only give me the ability to study and do the work of a dental student but also graduate with honors.”

“I also believe you will graduate with honors, Jessica.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lazar.”

“You are welcome, Jessica. Dr. Chung Li will ask you the next set of questions.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lazar. Jessica, I want to say, your answers are intriguing.”

“Thank you, Dr. Chung Li.”

“You are welcome, Jessica. The subject of your next two questions fall under the category of dental school questions. Why should we choose you?”

“I would say because of who I am. I have leadership qualities. I was the class president in my sophomore year at Columbia. In high school I was the vice president of the Biology Squad. I have offered academic help to fellow classmates, and I am not afraid to ask for help. I am also a young lady who is ethical. I’m always in search of honesty and truth because I am a Libra.”

“Very good, Jessica. My last question to you is what do you look for in a good dental school?”

“I think a good dental school provides the best education for its students. When I graduate from dental school I want to be confident in my skill to provide services to my patients that are above the standard of care. A good dental school has financial aid officers who offer at least twenty alternatives to dental students to finance our education. My scariest nightmare involves being in student loan debt for twenty or thirty years after graduation. And a good dental school demands its students work as a team.”

“Very well done, Jessica. Thank you.”

“You are welcome, Dr. Chung Li.”

“Jessica, I want to say I have enjoyed your answers to our questions. I will ask your last two questions.”

“Thank you, Dr. Waldron. I’m ready.”

“Jessica, these questions deal with current issues and a scenario. What is the biggest challenge facing dentistry today?”

“My dental mentors have discussed this with me. I would say it’s when HMOs, PPOs, and insurance companies undercut the fees dentists charge for their services. Some dentists increase their patient load to compensate for their loss of income. What happens to the quality of care? The overhead certainly does not decrease with the increase in the patient load. This reality is disheartening to me.”

“Jessica, your dental mentors have been honest with you. I’m happy your passion for dentistry has not wavered based on what you just mentioned. My last question to you will be your scenario. One of your classmates meets you in the hall and whispers to you that he has the questions and answers to an upcoming exam. He offers you a copy. What will you do?”

“Dr. Waldron, that is an interesting question. Now, do you want me to be honest?”

“Of course, Jessica, and remember you are a Libra.”

“Yes. Well, the copy of questions and, more important, the answers would tempt me. But in reality, I would tell the instructor the exam was in circulation. I would not reveal the student’s identity, and I would ask the instructor not to reveal that I had squealed.

Another cause for my squealing would be to prevent the students who were privy to the exam from earning an easy A while I busted my chops to study for an A.”

“Thank you for your truthful answers, Jessica. Well, this ends the question and answer segment of your interview. Your interview can end with your closing words or it can end now. Would like to say anything?”

“Yes, I would, Dr. Waldron. I want to say Mrs. Julien was right. You are the kindest Admissions Committee I have ever experienced. Although this is my first interview, I think the same will hold true when I interview at different schools. Your smiles have made me feel at ease during this stressful process. I thank you all.”

All the doctors thank Jessica for her kind comments. Jessica and the doctors rise from their chairs. Jessica goes to the conference table and shakes each of their hands. Then she exits the meeting room and closes the door behind her.

“How did it go, Jessica?”

“I think it went well, Mrs. Julien. Only God knows if I’ll get accepted.”

“I think you will, Jessica. You are an excellent student. Don’t worry.”

“I won’t worry. I’m just a little tired. I’m going to the student lounge to unwind. I’m just going to veg out there until Eric finishes his classes.”

“Is Eric your boyfriend? I see the two of you together all the time.”

“Eric is my best male friend as we speak. If all goes as planned, we will be an item before the day ends. Well, I will see you later, Mrs. Julien.”

“Good-bye, sweetie.”

Jessica walks out of the Dean’s Office and presses the button for the elevator.

“Do you believe those questions? Thank you, Jesus. The Admissions Committee didn’t ask you know what.” Jessica realizes that she can hear herself.

The elevator doors open and she gets in. Jessica presses the button for the basement. When Jessica gets off the elevator, she smiles. The lounge is oddly empty. She goes over to the coffee station and fixes herself a latte. Jessica carefully takes it to a semicircular booth and sits. She reflects on her interview.

The question about the three most influential people in her life makes Jessica think about the total impact these three women have made on her life. Jessica wishes she had the time to tell the Admissions Committee the whole story.

Jessica is amazed at how someone she has never met continues to influence her life. Great-Grandma was her maternal great-grandmother. Her place of birth was Barbados, West Indies, around 1870. She was a businesswoman, a speculator. Her business involved buying crops and selling them at higher prices.

What makes an impact on Jessica is her independence. Great-Grandma had five children from at least two different men. She chose not to marry these men. Jessica thinks her great-grandma’s choices must have been very controversial in the late 1800s.

Great-Grandma provided well for her children. Cynthia told Jessica her mother often talked about her young life with Great-Grandma. Great-Grandma owned a four-bedroom home. She had a six-person dual horse-drawn carriage. Great-Grandma hired help to care for the horses. She provided her children with fine linens for their beds, which had thick box springs and mattresses. Great-Grandma also promised each child a college education in the most prestigious schools.

Unfortunately, Great-Grandma’s life ended when she was around forty years old. The cause of death is uncertain but cholera is suspected.

Great-Grandma’s legacy has shown Jessica the importance of being financially independent. Jessica is in awe of how Great-Grandma cared for five children as a single mother in the early 1900s, had a business, and supported herself and her family in grand style.

Grandma passed away six months ago. Jessica still hasn’t recovered. Grandma influenced Jessica spiritually. Grandma was ten years old when Great-Grandma died. She and her four brothers were separated

after their mother's untimely death and were taken in by relatives. Grandma's aunt and uncle took her in, but her lifestyle drastically changed because her aunt and uncle were poor.

Grandma had a baby boy when she was sixteen years old, but he only lived eight months. Thrush took his life. Grandma had a second son, whom she left with a relative when she emigrated to America in the 1920s. Like her mother, Grandma chose not to marry the men who fathered her first two children. Grandma eventually sent for her son when she had the money. Grandma's son was a young man when she sent for him to join her in America.

When Jessica was a child, Grandma lived in a cozy one-bedroom apartment. Even though her apartment was small, Jessica and her siblings felt at home. Jessica loved visiting Grandma because she cooked Bajan dishes. J.J., Jessica, and Janine looked forward to eating cou-cou covered in a tomato-based sauce with codfish, peas and rice; flying fish; and rum cake.

Grandma was an excellent cook. For each grandchild she would bake a birthday cake. She would hand mix the cake batter in a large ceramic bowl with a wooden spoon. Grandma would give the batter five hundred strokes. The cake would bake and rise so high. No cake needed icing because every cake tasted heavenly.

When Sunday came, all fun ended. It was time to go to church. Church was an all-day affair. Grandma did not have a car. So she used a taxicab to transport everyone to church. They traveled from the Bronx to Manhattan. Grandma attended a Pentecostal church and served as an usher.

The Sunday routine involved attending morning service followed by fellowship hour. A hot, delicious, and hearty meal was served by women in white attire. Sunday school followed fellowship hour. After Sunday school was over, Grandma, Jessica, and her siblings left church to return home. When it was dinnertime, Grandma warmed up the dinner she had prepared on the previous day. After they ate, they would freshen up and travel back to church for evening worship.

Jessica enjoyed evening worship because the music was livelier and jazzier than the music of the morning service. Guitars, drums, electric piano, and less inhibited parishioners made the evening service experience exciting to Jessica. Jessica cannot remember when she accepted Jesus as her personal savior. Jessica is certain she did it as a child. Her earliest memories include God and Jesus. Jessica believes that she accepted Jesus during an evening service at Grandma's church. Jessica thinks since she

was a shy and introverted girl she probably accepted Jesus while sitting in her pew. Jessica doubts if she walked to the altar during the altar call.

Grandma attended church every Sunday. She often read scriptures and prayed in the presence of her grandchildren. Grandma praised Jesus more often than she praised God. The only radio Grandma listened to was Christian radio and mainly Oral Roberts. If Grandma watched television, she watched only Christian-based programs.

It was Grandma who showed Jessica an unwavering faith in God and Jesus. Jessica thinks of Grandma losing her mother at age ten and losing her eight-month-old child. Then when Grandma came to America and met her husband and had a baby, Cynthia, Grandma's husband abandoned them both. Numerous evictions followed for Grandma and baby Cynthia. Grandma was separated for years from her second son because she couldn't afford to send for him. Grandma's life was not easy, but she did not give up. Jessica tries to model Grandma's trust in the Lord.

Jessica figures she calls her mother Momma because Cynthia called Grandma Momma. Momma was always in the smartest classes from elementary school through high school. Momma earned a bachelor's degree and two master's degrees. As Jessica stated during her interview, the two master's degrees were earned at Columbia University on two apprenticeships.

Momma is Jessica's educational mentor. Momma has taught Jessica and her siblings that education is a direct link to one's economic future. Every summer Momma created lessons. Momma held summer school each weekday morning. Jessica, J.J., and Janine could not go out to play until they completed their assignments. Jessica was not a motivated student at the time and preferred to play.

As a young adult, Jessica appreciates what Momma did and now sees the benefits of studying hard. When Jessica projects into the future and earns her doctorate of dental surgery, she will eventually own a dental practice and produce income that will translate into a comfortable living.

A friend of Jessica approaches her booth.

"Jessie, Jessie. Where have your thoughts taken you? I've been watching you from a distance. It seemed as though you were in no-man's-land."

"Hi, Deborah. Sit down."

“Jessie, are you frightened about tonight?”

“I’d say a little. But I wouldn’t say that’s why I was spaced out. One of my interviewers asked me to name the three most influential people in my life. I told the committee who they are. I was reminiscing.”

“How did the interview go, Jessie?”

“I’d say the interview went well. The committee members liked my answers.”

“Do you think you will get accepted to Columbia’s dental school?”

“Deborah, only God knows.”

Another friend of Jessica and Deborah walks up to them and slides into the booth to take a seat before saying hello. She smiles at Jessica and Deborah.

“Hello, ladies.”

Jessica and Deborah greet Rachel.

“I don’t even have to ask you how your interview went. You are a shoo-in to be accepted into Columbia College of Dental Medicine.”

“Thank you for your confidence in me, Rachel.”

“What about you, Deborah? Have you heard from Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons yet?”

“No, Rachel. Only three weeks have elapsed since my interview. In addition, I have other interviews scheduled.”

“Hey, Rachel. Since you are asking all the questions, give us the lowdown on your future prospects. The last we heard is you were waiting for an answer.”

“Well, Jessie, I found out two days ago. I was awarded an apprenticeship in the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. I’m going to get my master’s and doctorate degrees right here at the school I love. Then I want to teach at this university as Dr. Rachel Winbush. You see, when I marry the man of my dreams, I’ll change my last name.”

Deborah and Jessica congratulate Rachel.

“When I get married after I become a dentist, I’m not changing my last name. My name is Jessica Euge. Let’s take Eric for example. If we got married and I changed my name, I would become Jessica Braswell. How

would my dental school classmates find me? My accomplishments would be lost as the former Jessica Euge.”

“Jessie, do you remember what God says about a husband and a wife becoming one?”

“Rachel, God is referring to becoming one in the spirit. He says nothing about becoming one in name.”

“Are you sure about that, Jessie? Can you direct me to the book, chapter, and verse that states that becoming as one does not refer to the family name?”

“Rachel, I cannot. I just feel I would be losing myself to my husband.”

“Jessie, I couldn’t have said it any better than you just did. Losing myself to my husband is what I can’t wait for.”

“Rachel, you know that is not what I meant.”

“Anyway, Miss Jessie, do you have any questions about tonight?”

“Deborah, I have ten thousand questions. But I prefer to learn them on my own with Eric. However, if either of you wants to give me one pearl of advice, I’m open.”

Rachel and Deborah express that they want to share highlights of their first experiences with Jessica. Jessica makes mental notes as her friends give their accounts of events. Now Jessica wants to ask a question she has had for some time.

“Is it true a guy’s motorcycle directly relates to his height?”

“A guy’s motorcycle? What are you talking about, Jessie?”

“Rachel, I know this may sound childish, but I can’t say the actual word because tonight I will be sinning big time. Using motorcycle for Eric’s private part and palace for my private part reduces the guilt and shame I will have before God.”

“What do you think about that, Deborah?”

“Rachel, whatever works for Jessie works for me. Jessie, I just need to ask how tall is Eric?”

“Eric is five feet eleven inches.”

“Oh, goodness. Jessie, all I have to say is focus on his beautiful eyes.”

“Thanks, Rachel.”

“And count to one hundred, dear.”

“Thanks, Deborah. Do you have any other survival tactics?”

“I do, Jessie. Make sure Eric’s motorcycle stays under the speed limit. More important, if the interior palatial temperature rises above ninety degrees and becomes arid, ask Eric to add some lubricant to his gears.”

“I will, Rachel.”

“Girl, don’t worry about a thing. In a month or so, your palace will crave the revving abilities of Eric’s motorcycle. Isn’t that right, Rachel?”

“That’s right, Deborah. Jessie, just take your time. Eric loves you and he won’t hurt you.”

“Thanks for your advice, you two. I just can’t wait to see Eric’s muscular body as I’ve never seen it before. All of his wrestling teammates have great bodies. Have you noticed that to be true?”

Rachel and Deborah agree emphatically. A young man holding a briefcase walks toward the girls’ booth. When the girls see him coming, they exit the booth as they say their good-byes to Jessica. Deborah and Rachel say hello to the young man as they pass him. He smiles as he advances to Jessica’s booth. He blows Jessica a kiss, and she puckers her lips. He slides into the booth and kisses Jessica.

“Eric, you look so hot in your suit, especially holding your briefcase. You look like a lawyer.”

“Lawyer, no. Civil engineer, yes. This is the way I plan on dressing when I seek to secure civil contracts.”

“Baby, I’ve seen you in suits before but today something is different.”

“I wonder what that could possibly be, Jess. I would guess you are thinking naughty thoughts of things to come?”

“You hit the nail on the head, Eric. So what do you have planned for us?”

“Jess, you can ask me five hundred times, and you will come up empty every time. Just go with the flow, relax, and enjoy. Enjoy as I am enjoying your black dress suit, which accentuates your shapely legs. When you wear heels, I become weak.” Eric finds the rate of his breathing is increasing, and he wants to control himself.

“How was your interview, Jess?”

“As I told my girls, the interview went well. The Admissions Committee commended me on my answers.”

“That’s great, Jess. I’m sure you’ll be accepted here. Oh, by the way, I made sure I took perfect notes during our physical chemistry class.”

“Can I copy the notes before we leave?”

Eric opens his briefcase and hands Jessica a copy of his notes and the homework assignment. He kisses his Jess.

“You know, Eric, I think I’ll keep you. You are so thoughtful, baby.” Jessica puts the papers in her purse. “Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

“I copy that, sweetheart.”

They slide out of the booth and walk hand in hand to the elevator.