

The Golden Candle

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This story comes from a collection of short stories I wrote this past summer as a Brackenridge Fellow with the Pitt Honors College under the mentorship of Pitt linguistics professor Dr. Abdesalam Soudi. My research during the fellowship combined my interests in linguistics and creative writing by tracing the impact of linguistic discrimination in the college-student population within systems of education and healthcare. Throughout the summer, I conducted a series of focus groups and individual interviews to hear college students' experiences with language discrimination throughout their lives, which I then crafted into three short fiction stories united under the theme of "The Power of Language." These stories are amalgamations of multiple informant's experiences bolstered by my own imaginative story details. They highlight the struggles of both non-native speakers of English and speakers of a non-dominant variety of English, as well as the lack of available translation services in many institutions. These stories also touch on many other complex themes of inclusion, identity, and our perceptions of others. "The Golden Candle" is the second story in this collection.

The Golden Candle

Milkweed root, spit of a salamander, a tear from a dying soldier, some dried hyacinth petals, and a dash of fairy dust. Combine them all in water from the Tigris, heat the potion over an open flame until boiling, then pour the liquid into a candle cast, let it cool overnight, and remove it from the mold in the morning.

That's how you make Tranquility, utter inner peace. Follow the same process with Dead Sea mud, ground tusk of a saber-toothed tiger, wolfsbane, fur of a six-toed cat, and a shard of a deceptive mirror, and you get the feeling of slipping into a hot bath after a cold day. But if you only cool that for two hours and add some lava from Pompeii, or the rind of a bergamot orange if your lava supply is running low, you can get the feeling of flying on a swing as a child, hitting that zenith of sunshine and wind in your face.

Tia Moore knows all of these potions. She can make you any feeling you ask for, whip it up into a nice, sparkly candle for you to take home and sniff when you're feeling low. She has devoted her retirement to this, and, for eight years now, she has made every emotion from Gratitude to Superiority.

Yet there is one more recipe Tia knows. It came to her in a dream, a slew of ingredients vividly flashing through her mind on some rainy Thursday night.

"At witching hour," Rothgobian would joke, his emerald goblin ears flapping as he chortled at his own remark. But while Tia knows the ingredients for this potion as well as she knows the plot of *Hamlet*—did I forget to mention that she used to be a high school English teacher? Witches really can get any jobs these days—she still has no idea what feeling the scent induces. It's overwhelming, and slightly bitter, but there's an intense brightness to it as well. She supposes that radiance comes from the unicorn sweat, rose hips, and octopus ink—despite being dark and viscous, ink actually has quite a luminosity to it—and the fact that the mixture was flash-cooled in the freezer, yielding a deep golden candle, like the tanned skin of a Greek Adonis. Despite its evasion of a label, the scent is familiar, and the name remains on the tip of Tia's tongue as if she can see it spelled out in front of her, but only through a blurry fog.

This candle lies in a crystal holder in the back of her shop in a locked cupboard that not even Rothgobian has the key to. It is not for sale, nor will it ever be. Not simply because it is an enigma, and possibly dangerous, but because it is the rarest potion Tia has ever concocted. The bitterness—Tia is certain of its origin. It comes from the fourth and final ingredient: dragon ashes.

While most people can accept that witches live among them, holding normal jobs and generally causing no harm, and that unicorns run free in some distant forests, mostly in Scandinavia and Iceland—modern lore always seems to leave out that they're a close cousin of the reindeer, who, in fact, do *not* tote around a fictional plump red man each December—they always get hung up on the issue of dragons existing.

"Wouldn't I see one in the sky, towering over cityscapes and breathing flames that burn whole villages?" Yet just because something exists, doesn't mean that it is plentiful. And therein lies the fate of the world's current dragons: they are severely endangered.

In order to get a dragon's ashes for a potion or a spell, you must burn the dragon alive. Cremating an already-dead dragon does not yield a powder of high enough quality. Only a mere

seventy years ago, witches, warlocks, and other sorcerers incinerated so many of these creatures that any chance at repopulation went up in flames, quite literally. Many spell-casters saw no issue with this at all, buying into the hysteria of the public about possible arsons and attacks caused by these giant beasts. Some witches even had theories that the KGB had contracted the dragons to drop nuclear missiles on the continental U.S., but these claims were no more credible than Joseph McCarthy's own harping about Hollywood Reds and the 205 State Department Commies.

After the Dragon Devastation of 1953, witches worldwide met to form the Stockholm Convention—Geneva was booked at the time—which included outlawing any form of slaughtering a dragon. The remaining dragon ashes existent the time were allocated equally to each sorcerer in the world, no matter how young they were at the time, for any possible future emergency use. Tia's supply is solidified within the golden candle, a waxy mystery that can never be recreated. At least, not by Tia.

Just as surely as she knows the undercurrent of bitterness is from the unnecessary suffering and sacrifice of a gentle creature, Tia also knows that this astringency belongs in the potion. Although most of her scents tend to be pleasant and optimistic, she is sure that this candle is supposed to be somewhat...sour. If only she could figure out what feeling the mixture longs to convey.

Yet, despite all her efforts, its inception was shrouded in dreamlike secrecy, and its existence continues so.

#

The rain is just starting to abate as Tia completes her rounds, straightening display cases and catching whiffs of—what was that? Curiosity? She heads to the back of the store and feels the tiny brass key hanging on a chain around her neck. *Click*. The cupboard unlocks and Tia begins the final task of her daily morning ritual: attempting to label the golden candle. As the sky clears, Tia focuses her energy on the ornate holder and the prize inside. Power, burning blue and hot, shoots from her shoulders to her fingertips, carrying intention and control. Casting a revealing spell is much like cracking a walnut—breaking through a protective layer to access the fleshy kernel within, one that might be rancid or hard to swallow, but equally could be piquant and pleasing.

Tia never was any good at cracking nuts.

She emerges from the back room, frustrated and fruitless, and, for some reason, Rothgobian is muttering to her about juice.

"It'll make you feel better, Ms. Tia," he rasps. "Grape or apple. Even cranberry is okay in small doses."

"I don't want juice, Goby," Tia sighs. "I just want to know what secrets that candle is holding."

"It will never reveal its true self. It cannot be trusted." Ah yes, the goblin's good ol' jealousy is never far away. Sometimes Tia wonders what cursed candles she could make if she used a strand of his hair or a clump of his earwax in one of her concoctions.

“Juice is best drank after a disappointment, and, do excuse me Ms. Tia, but this is surely a large personal failure for you, and fruit is best consumed after a rain, marking appreciation for the crops that the water nourishes, which of course you know, Ms. Tia, hence my recommendation for fruit juice at this time,” Rothgobian rambles on. “If you’d like me to get into the specific advantages of grape or apple, Ms.--”

“Back to the cupboard you nasty cretin!” Tia spews, suddenly, though there’s no real heat behind the words. The goblin scuttles to the back room, slipping stealthily into his designated cupboard below the window. He’s an ugly little thing, all green warts and flapping ears and quick, crab-like movements, but Tia loves him dearly.

She first met Rothgobian back in her school days—teaching. Goby was nary a twinkle in his mother’s beady eye when Tia was a child herself. He was working for Davila Thompkins, the cruelest cape designer in the Northern Hemisphere. That same beady eye which had twinkled him to life handed him over to Davila once he was old enough to earn a livable wage, leaving Rothgobian’s mother to raise his eight younger siblings.

At the time, Tia was busy lecturing 16-year-olds on *Macbeth* at Jefferson High, a school that had a staff and student population of 92 percent African-American. And if Tia maybe defended Shakespeare’s trio of meddling witches a bit too heavily or threw in a few extra Toni Morrison books, no one was the wiser. She recruited Rothgobian when she began planning to open the candle shop, much to his chagrin originally.

“How will people react, Ms. Tia, to a witch flaunting her skills so publicly?” he questioned. “I know you wanted to direct *The Crucible* at Jefferson this spring, but this may be too method, even for you. If you burn, I will not go with you.” Goby never was too fond of subtlety.

Yet, despite his protests, Scents and Sensibilities was created, and, no matter how much Rothgobian grumbled about the novel having absolutely nothing to do with candles, his secret affinity for puns—the Achilles’ heel of all goblins—allowed him to put up with the literary blasphemy, cementing a place for the cozy shop in his pea-sized heart.

As for Goby’s fears of a witch displaying her talents so publicly, Tia did take safeguards to ensure she wouldn’t be burned at the stake. If anyone does protest a witch using her talents to make and sell candles that smell like feelings, she simply leads them to an array on the leftmost wall of the store and encourages them to inhale deeply, filling their mind with the smell of...Confusion. Once that scent has scrambled their other senses, Rothgobian shepherds them out the door, turns them around thrice, and shoves them on their merry way.

Tia would have started her candle shop much sooner than retirement, but being a witch doesn’t exactly pay, and it honestly isn’t even all that surprising anymore to non-magic people—thank you to the young adult book genre for that—so it at was only after 35 devoted years of high school English that she was able to realize Scents and Sensibilities. Not to say that Tia didn’t adore being a teacher, because she did truly love introducing her students to new realms through classic novels and reading their essays about symbolism and parallelism and analogies that she herself hadn’t even considered, not to mention uplifting them and their shared culture by having them read examples of Black excellence, but being able to practice her craft so openly, and

physically give people positive feelings, was unmatched by any other experience in her career. It was like Maya Angelou stated: “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” And Tia can make people feel good.

Except, of course, Rothgobian, who is still huddled in his cabinet in the back room. Tia strides over, knocks on the door, and waits until his green head pokes out.

“I’m sorry, Goby,” she sighs. “I just...I’m just stressed.”

“That’s okay, Ms. Tia.” Goby holds out a spindly arm, fingers clutched around a plastic cup. “I drank the fruit juice and now I feel better.”

#

After Tia’s rounds, the store opens for customers and Rothgobian logs onto the computer to catalogue inventory and work the register while Tia charms the shoppers.

“Ms. Tia!” his nasally voice rings out into the room. “We have a special request!” His slender fingers steeple and the pads knock gently together in excitement. Special requests come in sometimes, usually through Scents and Sensibilities’ online request form. They’re often personal, like the joy experienced at a specific child’s birthday party or the pride of an Olympian after winning a qualifying event, and they require something from the scene of the feeling in the potion, like a bit of the birthday cake’s icing or a bead of the athlete’s sweat. They’re Goby’s favorite scents to prepare.

“Well, go on, open it up,” Tia instructs, chuckling slightly at the goblin’s look of an elated child on Christmas morning, preparing to open his presents. A few clicks of the mouse and Goby’s face shifts to one of confusion.

“What is it?” Tia asks, her own brow creasing.

“Well...Ms. Tia...it’s, umm...” Tia quickly finishes up her current conversation about the new Confidence candle and heads to the counter. It isn’t often that Goby’s lost for words. She looks at him expectantly, and leans in when his voice comes out as a scratchy whisper.

“It’s an odd request, Ms. Tia. It’s not...pleasant.”

“Well, what is it? Spit it out, Goby!” Yet the goblin merely turns the monitor to face her. In the soft glow of electronic blue light, Tia reads the peculiar feeling for herself: Shame.

#

People have ordered unhappy feelings before; this surely isn’t the first time Tia has received a request for a negative emotion. But they’re normally more personalized, imbued with some sad, beautiful, tragic meaning. Take for example Mrs. Ferguson, whose relatives lost virtually everything in Hurricane Katrina. Lottie had ordered a candle that smelled like the fear of drowning in roof-high waters, of knowing that water levels were rising quicker than rescue boats were speeding over, and surely Mother Nature’s tantrum was going to win the standoff. She wanted it to remind her family that they had survived, that they would never have to feel that fear again. Of course, at the time, Tia suggested she instead take a candle for the feeling of finally being rescued by boat, but Lottie insisted on the fear. Grief is a funny thing that way, especially when it’s compounded by survivor’s guilt.

With a vial of the murky hurricane water and some other assorted oddities, Tia was able to whip up the waxy potion in half an hour, and was even invited to the Ferguson's Labor Day cookout that year.

Yet the current request comes with no specialization, no water sample or cake icing or other tangible fragment of the feeling to rely on. Tia will have to make the candle how she made the rest of her scents—by recreating the feeling herself.

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Making the feeling of flying on a swing was the best. Tia and Rothgobian spent a whole day at the local playground, just experiencing the combination of delight and freedom and anticipation—for research, of course. They came into the store that night with grass in their shoes and giggles on their tongues and crafted the candle well past sunrise. It was truly wonderful, rivaled only by the “Picnic on the Eiffel Tower Lawn” scent from last year's special collection, which was secretly Goby's favorite, even if he did have to travel in the cargo hold of the plane.

But making Shame—well, it's going terribly. It isn't a feeling anyone would willingly choose to experience again, and none of Tia's attempts seem to be strong enough. First is the Marcus Affair. Well, more like the Tia Affair since she was the one who cheated, but whenever she pictures her high school boyfriend's face after discovering her and Tyrone's make-out session in the student parking lot, she feels a deep, unpleasant burn low in her gut that slowly crawls up her neck until it peaks in her ears, ringing like crashing cymbals. But that was nearly 50 years ago, and the potion comes out watery and thin, unsuitable for forming a candle.

Next is Mr. Salvatore's infamous outfit. It is expected that a history teacher dress somewhat oddly—Tia would never deny that her blouses and scarves had often fit the mold of the caricatured “English teacher”—but Roman's bright coral-and-blue-checked shirt paired with dark green slacks and chestnut shoes was something out of a picnic disaster. There may have been a staff pool going for how many classes Roman could teach before a student called him out for his clothes, and it may have been started by Tia. Of course, she heard the familiar cymbals when he eventually explained that his wife was away on a business trip, leaving his colorblind eyes to choose his outfit all on their own.

But apparently embarrassing a coworker doesn't yield anywhere near enough shame for Tia's purposes because the candle comes out smelling more like regret tinged with humor. So now she's pacing behind the register while Goby perches atop the counter, suggesting unhelpful—and frankly, rather upsetting—incidents.

“There was that beach bikini malfunction when we went to Lisbon a few years ago.”

Tia waves him off with an exasperated hand, yet he forges on.

“There was that time when you got drunk at the spring collection reveal party and tipped over the \$2,000 chocolate fountain,” he supplies, before grabbing his right earlobe and shaking it. “I was washing cocoa out of my ears for a week, Ms. Tia.”

“Yes, Goby, and I do apologize for that, but I don't think listing my personal failures is helping at the moment.” Goby's large eyes blink at her owlishly. “Scram!” she says, propelling the goblin to his well-worn cupboard.

Chocolate fountains and rough tides aside, Tia knows what memory she must unlock to sculpt this scent, and she doesn't need a candle to incite the feeling of dread coursing through her at the thought of releasing something so well-buried. If only the recipe for Shame could come to her in the whirlwind pastels of a dream, like her most cherished candle.

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23 years and eight months ago, give or take a day. She's projecting her thoughts into the air in front of her, as witches tend to do, and she sees the scene clearly. Her lime green dress sparkles at the front of the classroom, like an older Tiana, casting shadows on the whiteboard behind her. Class will start in a few minutes, and a list of symbols in *To Kill a Mockingbird* fills the canvas. In the front row of desks, Eric James is frantically scribbling down the list in classic overachiever fashion. Current Tia's lips quirk up into a small grin. Eric was a teacher's dream – participatory, intelligent, motivated, and frustratingly neurotic. But she's not here to reminisce about her successes, and she strains her ears to hear the conversation she knows is unfolding concurrently.

"I woulda just left you alone, you coulda had this boy, like, you could've been had him! You coulda snatched him when you wanted to! Like, I'm really—I'm just done. I'm done, Jocelyn."

There it is. Kiara and Jocelyn are bickering over some new boy on the track team—Josh or Jake or something.

"I don't even want him no more!" Jocelyn snaps back. "You think I still want him after he been seeing you?"

"I think you'll take anyone's man and, like, it don't matter if he ugly or dumb or what! You be stealing men all the time and now you just mad I finally got one of my own!"

Tia could've ignored them and waited for class to start. She could've refocused her attention on Eric. She could've rechecked her list of symbols to make sure she hadn't forgotten any. She could've done so many other things, but the past can't be changed, and current Tia's shoulders hunch while her eyelids squeeze together, physically cringing, as she watches her past self-interrupt the two girls.

"Kiara, Jocelyn, calm down!"

Two faces swivel angrily towards her. Current Tia takes a deep breath at the same time past Tia does, and, almost as if through the haze of a rainstorm or the mental fog of dehydration, the witch hears her younger voice ring out, slightly muted but ever professional.

"First of all, you don't need to scream over a boy in my class. You should be copying down those notes on the board. Second of all, it's 'doesn't matter,' not 'don't matter'. This is an English class. You need to talk right. I know you both know correct grammar."

The projection begins to fade, but Tia doesn't need a recreation to visualize Kiara and Jocelyn's faces, not when the image of betrayal has been seared into her memory. Kiara's wide eyes versus Jocelyn's glaring ones—shock versus anger. The corner of Jocelyn's mouth sneaking upwards into a hostile sneer as Kiara's own lips part slightly, as if words will pour forth from them and she's just waiting for them to arrive.

Then Tia's shooting forward in time like a surfboard swept away on an overactive wave. She lands a few hours later in a rowdy bar somewhere downtown. There's a hint of lavender near her that she would know anywhere: Michelle's perfume. Roman is there, too, explaining some historic battle to Lydia and Claude, who are whispering incantations into their shot glasses. Roman never minded hanging around magical folks, and, before the colorblind incident, this was their usual Friday-night haunt.

"It's been a long week, and I been waiting for these drinks," Michelle proclaims, and everyone laughs, loud and easy in the warmth that she effortlessly spreads everywhere she goes. One year, Tia even convinced her to perform stand-up comedy in the annual World Sorcerers' Soirée. Michelle was an instant hit.

"It don't matter what I'm drinking, long as I'm drinking," Tia hears herself counter. And it's right there. Her very own hypocrisy. As much as she's tried to convince herself all these years that it doesn't matter, it most definitely does, and that's the crux of the issue, isn't it? Because Tia had scolded her students for saying "it don't matter," had yelled at them for speaking in a legitimate variety of English, thereby insulting their culture and their intelligence, and then she turned around and spoke those same words herself. Michelle would never have made that mistake.

The holographic conversation continues among the others, but Tia can't decipher anything over the uproar in her ears, her cheeks shining like rose-colored spotlights. It's a good thing Rothgobian is still sulking in his cupboard so he doesn't have to see Tia's back sink down against the wall, her curled-in body landing in a swamp of remorse.

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Two weeks. That's how long it's been since Rothgobian first read the order on the computer screen. The longest it's ever taken Tia to make a candle before was ten days, and that was only because she had to import the blood of a hellhound from the fiery abyss. Flamazon delivery is notoriously delayed.

It seems every few days brings a new obstacle for Tia to be crushed by. She adds too much porcupine quill and must start over. Goby gets a papercut and his sluggish goblin blood ruins the second batch. She wakes like clockwork at 4 AM each night with close-ups of curling lips and narrowed eyelids, leaving her drowsy and unfocused and downright irritable the next morning. She's stressed and upset and guilt-ridden and winds up scrunched in Rothgobian's cupboard, hot saline tickling her cheeks. Shame revived is a cruel adversary.

Goby finds her an hour later, after their usual lunch break which Tia's been skipping since last Tuesday. Her linen-covered calves stick out of the small wooden clearing that's obscuring her head and muffling the slight sniffing.

"Hey! That's my cupboard!" the goblin squawks, grabbing Tia's shoe and pulling the leg attached to it harshly. Tia's face slides out from the enclosure, damp and forlorn.

"I know you've been crying, Ms. Tia, but you need to find a different place to do it. I will not have puddles in my cupboard." As funny as Goby unintentionally is, Tia can't bring herself to laugh at his absurd declaration.

“I’m sorry, Goby.” She scoots forward more and pushes herself up to a seated position. “I think I’m gonna cancel this order.” Rothgobian stands stock-still, his gaze boring into Tia’s downturned forehead. He offers no absolution, so Tia forges on.

“I can’t wear myself thin over this one candle. It’s not worth all this grief.” She looks up, drained, bloodshot eyes meeting large, blinking ones. “Right?”

Goby shuffles away, out of the back room, and something in Tia’s chest sinks down a little, like quicksand swallowing its latest victim. The soft *tick* of her watch marks seconds passing, a weighted blanket of silence settling over her legs, her arms, her torso, drowning out everything but the incessant worry banging around her mind.

Rothgobian slides back in, unexpectedly gracefully, clutching a handful of tissues and a glass of some purplish liquid, which he places on the ground before Tia.

“Grape juice,” Goby supplies. She’s really got to introduce him to sparkling water soon. A whole new playground for his palette. Maybe he’ll finally get off this fruit juice kick.

One of the first qualities Tia noticed in Rothgobian so many years ago was his perception. It is often absent. He’ll beg Tia to explain obvious jokes or try to placate a customer gawking at prices by telling them that “only a lot of money can buy Happiness.” But once in a blue moon, around the same time that the world’s werewolves go insane, Goby will say something that just cuts Tia to her core, all icy and insightful and utterly accurate.

“Ask me again,” the goblin instructs after Tia reluctantly takes a sip of the juice.

“Ask you what?” Tia’s words are slow and hesitant.

“If it’s worth the grief.” Tia just peers up at him, eyebrows meeting in the middle of her forehead. Goby huffs an impatient sigh, then continues in a fake falsetto voice, “It’s not worth all this grief, right?” He promptly responds to himself in his regular growl and Tia feels like she’s watching an internal ping pong match play out.

“You owe it to them, Ms. Tia, for the grief *you* caused *them*.”

There must be a blue moon approaching.

#

Two weeks and two days. It’s the longest Tia’s ever taken to make a candle. The new record, just in time for the anonymous requester’s pickup tomorrow afternoon. As she slides back into sleep after her usual 4 AM delirium, Tia begins to wonder for the first time just who that customer will be.

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Anxiety plagues the morning, like a tidal wave of repressed energy, an intense desperation to please a collective conscience. Tia feels light and floaty; a feather that could simply drift away at any point and evaporate into calming nothingness. Everything around her is passing in short bursts of sounds and colors, then slow-motion reverberations, then time that feels normal but somehow contains either too many or too few minutes. Her precious golden candle remains ever mysterious, even though Tia frantically casts two extra revealing spells on it. Rothgobian consumes an entire jug of apple cider in the span of three hours.

Then, the door is rattling, and the clock is blinking out 2:30, on the dot. Tia’s lungs steal some air before they turn it to ice. The entrance swings open and heels are clacking against the

wooden floors. Tia's eyes scan over the figure. There are some scattered wrinkles on her face and she's a little more filled out, but it is unmistakably the visage that's been haunting Tia's dreams. In some sort of universal joke that Tia finds more cruel than humorous, standing before her now is...

Kiara.

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Kiara smiles through the exchange, pays with a credit card and waits patiently for Goby to wrap up the burgundy candle in a cute little gift bag. The smile is genuine, like one of two old friends reuniting, but something is thrumming beneath the surface, just under Kiara's lips. Pride? Smugness? Victory? Tia wishes people smelled like their emotions as simply as her candles do.

"It's been a long time," Tia finally settles on. Her voice is creaky and slow, a rusty door hinge of old age that she's managed to elude until now. "I hope you've been well." Kiara's eyes soften.

"It has been long," she replies, right hand reaching out to accept the gift bag from Goby. Her eyes rake up and down over Tia quickly. "I always thought you were a witch," she adds. "Just didn't know I was right til Jocelyn sent me your website. She's been keeping tabs on you." It's said with no heat, yet Tia's stomach still drops.

Kiara turns slightly, shoulders angling towards the door, and Tia feels like sand is falling through the cracks between her fingers and getting lost in the vast expanse of an invariable beach.

"Why shame?" she blurts out, pausing Kiara's departure. "Why did you want me to make a shame candle?" Tia knows she sounds desperate and frenzied, but she can't let a single grain more escape her clenched fists.

Kiara's smile flattens to a curve, brow furrowing and eyes narrowing. *Isn't it obvious?* Her features seem to scream.

"I wanted you to feel how I did."

There was one time that Tia had to travel to Hell to pick up a package when the Flamazon workers went on strike half a decade ago. Hell was dim and sticky and nauseating, and Tia didn't think she could get any lower than the persistent terrible feeling in that terrible place. She was mistaken. Kiara's words are a rock, and they drag Tia down, down, down.

"At first, I thought it was nothing, just usual school grammar crap, but it wasn't," Kiara continues, her resentment gaining traction, making her voice slowly more scathing. "You made me feel ashamed for how I talk, how my family talks."

"I know," Tia mutters, hushed. But Kiara doesn't want contrition, she wants a fight, and Tia's apologetic tone only angers her further.

"You know I had a big party when I graduated high school with my parents, my cousins, and all my friends, and I had some white friends there, too. I was ashamed of how my family was talking to them. I told them to 'talk properly,' that I didn't want my white friends to think they were uneducated. I was ashamed of my whole identity." Kiara is getting more agitated as she goes on.

“Then, I get to college, and I’m watching this lecture by a Black professor. She’s saying how the way we talk is fine, and she’s calling it a language, saying it’s legitimate. That it’s got its own grammar, not just the dumb one they teach you in school. She’s saying that it don’t mean we stupid and that we been talking like this for generations and that it’s part of our culture.”

As Kiara finally voices the truth she’s been holding in for years, Tia notes her change in language, the switch from what Kiara was always told was the only correct manner of speaking to the way that she’s come to learn is just as correct.

“And the worst part?” Kiara continues. “I know you be talking that way too when you not teaching or—candle-making. But you were still screaming at me and Jocelyn because—because you a hypocrite!”

She shouts the last part, looking more heartbroken than enraged. Her breaths are coming quickly, blazer-covered chest expanding and contracting arrhythmically. Rothgobian scatters away to the back room, leaving Tia miserable and wanting in the wake of Kiara’s veracious accusation.

“I was tryna prepare you for the real world!” Tia attempts to justify. “We can’t survive in this world without learning to talk like they do, like white people do. This system ain’t set up to help us, Kiara.”

Kiara’s wide eyes echo her teenage self, but years of experience have dimmed shock to a knowing sadness.

“I know,” she whispers. “I gotta use my white girl voice when I talk to my coworkers, when I go to my son’s parent-teacher conferences or set up doctor’s appointments. I know I talk differently with my friends and family, and I know it ain’t your fault, but I’m still damn mad at you.”

Tia soaks in the words, lets Kiara’s cleansing disappointment wash over her essence, lets it tickle the ancient power that burns azure through her body, unsure of how to respond to her former student’s revelation of undeserved clemency. But Kiara is speaking again, and this time she really does sound like a teenager, petulant and demanding and hurting so deeply.

“What the hell do we do?”

Tia wishes she could fix this, could slap a Band-Aid over a scratch and stop the bleeding, but prejudice can’t be cured like a temporary inconvenience, so she just mirrors Kiara’s lost expression and falls quiet. Silence stretches between the two women, like years of life lived in the shadows, deep in the dark ravines of one’s own soul, safe and sheltered and utterly, horribly, repressed.

#

Kiara is just about ready to leave, gift bag in hand. Goby has returned from his cupboard now that the yelling has stopped, his lips stained purple and his fingers sticky with drying grape juice. Tia almost laughs at his ridiculous coping mechanism. Kiara had thanked her for the candle and the conversation, called it healing and cathartic. She’d explained her search for closure and how she needed Tia to bear witness to the suffering she had caused Kiara, and she’d offered the older woman a warm, true grin. Yet something is nagging at Tia’s mind, pulling on the corner of her thoughts like an impatient child. Tia doesn’t want Kiara to leave her store, to

leave this interaction with only a remembrance of shame. She feels like she needs to give something to Kiara, something momentous, some token of their shared grief.

“Goby,” she calls. “Go get the golden candle.”

Rothgobian’s ears rise straight up as his mouth falls comically open.

“The golden candle, Ms. Tia?” he asks in surprise. “The one in the crystal holder? The one you never let anyone, not even me, get near, Ms. Tia?”

“Yes, Goby, that one.” Tia pulls off the chain from around her neck and hands it to the goblin, who is now a sickly shade of light green. His fingers curl around the brass key, eyes devouring his prize.

“Ms. Tia...” he says in wonder. Then he’s off, rushing towards the back room.

“The golden candle?” Kiara asks.

“My most prized one,” Tia explains. “One of a kind.” She smiles conspiratorially, and Kiara’s head tilts slightly to the left in a gesture of curious confusion.

Rothgobian returns in record time, crystal holder clutched tightly to his small goblin chest, eyes glued on the waxy structure inside, and Tia fears for a moment that pure adoration might be able to light a flame and that her enigmatic treasure would surely burn to a stump under Goby’s worshipping gaze.

“Give it here, Goby,” Tia instructs, and she practically has to yank it from the goblin’s unwilling digits.

“Thank you,” she says with a pointed look towards the tiny key he’s tried to hide in his right ear, and Rothgobian reluctantly hands that over, too.

“I’m not sure what scent it is,” she tells Kiara, “but it is my most cherished creation.”

Tia feels the grooves of the ornate holder under her fingertips, runs her palms over the smooth surface of the candle itself. She closes her eyes, tracing the lines produced of dream sequences and enlivened by years of revealing spells. Her eyes open once more as her hands extend the candle to Kiara.

“I want you to have it.”

Kiara looks unsure, but she wraps her own hands around the crystal, examines the delicate candle for a minute, then lifts the wick up to her nose and breathes in. She exhales slowly as a smile overtakes her face, grand and genuine and certain.

“You know what it is.” It’s a statement, not a question, but Kiara isn’t revealing any more than the candle itself is.

“I think you should keep it,” Kiara simply responds. Tia is about to protest, but Kiara continues.

“You know that boy me and Jocelyn were fighting over? Jordan?” Tia knew it was a J name. “He wasn’t worth it. Boy was ugly *and* dumb.” Then she starts laughing, loud and rumbling, and it’s warming the whole store, removing the twist of emotions of the past hour. And she’s laughing and laughing and laughing, and Tia feels a thrum of energy snake around the golden candle in her palms, swirling and humming and intensely alive, beating to the reverberations of Kiara’s laugh even after she’s left the shop.

Once alone again, Tia turns to Rothgobian, twin pairs of eyes on the radiant candle.

“Maybe it’s a bad feeling,” Goby suggests. “Maybe she wants you to feel bad like she did, Ms. Tia.”

But Tia knows something has shifted between Kiara and herself.

“I don’t think so,” she responds, eyes still focused on the aureate treasure beneath her thumbs. She imitates Kiara’s actions from before, raising the candle to her nose and inhaling its rich scent. All at once, she is wholly aware of why Kiara has given it back to her. The aroma rises around her, bittersweet and achingly warm, inhabiting her mind, her body, and her soul.

Forgiveness.

Acknowledgements

Throughout this story, Tia and Kiara speak African American Vernacular English (AAVE), a variety of English that is often discounted and seen as incorrect, as illustrated in this tale. However, AAVE is a legitimate language with its own lexicon and grammar, like Kiara explains. I do not speak AAVE, so I consulted the sources below when writing Tia and Kiara’s dialogue. The Corpus of Regional African American Language (CORAAAL) is a wonderful resource filled with transcriptions of real conversations from speakers of AAVE. Jack Sidnell is a professor of linguistic anthropology at the University of Toronto Mississauga who specializes in Caribbean languages, pidgins and creoles, and African American English. He has created many guides about AAVE grammar.

Additionally, both Tia and Kiara’s stories are based on the experiences of informants from focus groups I conducted about linguistic discrimination before writing this story. While these informants remain anonymous, I’d like to extend my deepest gratitude to them for sharing their own stories so openly with me and allowing me to weave them into my own imaginative verse. I hope I’ve done them justice.

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