

I am crying in line at the Krispy Kreme drive thru of Cotswold. I have been crying all morning. The line is inching forward every few minutes as it does on Sundays, most especially after the emblazoned "Hot Now" sign flashes its neon lettering into the blueness of the fall sky. It is this sign that lures me down Sharon Amity Rd. I am not hungry but the anticipated taste of two hot original glazed donuts melting themselves into my mouth until there's nothing left but sugar crystals is reason enough for the trip. Just minutes before, as I sat waiting for the light to change at Sharon Amity and Randolph, I think to stop at the Shell station on my right to see if they have the morning paper available. I decided instead that I'm in no mood as of yet to interact with anyone face to face so I pull into a gas stall and sit.

My partner's Chiweenie is in the back seat moving about, occasionally pausing to look at me, cocking his head to the side as if to question why we've stopped if not to get gas. To make the trip worthwhile I decide to clean out my car, ridding it of the fast food bags and half empty coffee cups that tell all of my dirty secrets. As I'm organizing the massive pile of shoes scattered across my car floor, I look up to see the sign is no longer red and bright and inviting. The Hot Now light has dimmed to a cool gray, without excitement or allure. I get back into the car and continue in the direction of the shop, knowing I had missed my window of opportunity for the hottest and freshest donuts they would have to offer until five that evening or later. This however, is not my reason for crying in line.

The night before, I'd learned of an incident that had taken place right around the corner from where I then sat. That past Friday evening, two Black sisters, Lesa and Mary Garris, stood in the parking lot of Camden Fairview apartments in South Charlotte as they awaited AAA to come and service the vehicle of one of the sisters who is a resident of the complex. As they waited, Susan Westwood, a middle aged White woman pulls into the lot, and in her drunkenness, stumbles over to the two women and begins to harass them. The sisters

immediately begin to record her as she asks them whether or not they live in the neighborhood and why they're "hanging out" in the parking lot. She goes on to in her drunken stupor to tell them that she's a hot, White, 51 year old woman making \$125,000 a year. The sisters maintain their composure as the woman continues her harassment yelling "This is Myers Park, Southpark bitch." Her racist rant reaches its peak when she clearly spews out a verbal threat of "Don't fuck with your life bitch." She also communicates the threat of bringing out her concealed weapons. "This is NC by the way," she states. By this time, one of the sisters is on the phone with the police as the drunken woman rambles on telling the women that they "don't belong here", asking them if their "baby daddy" lives in the complex.

In the meantime, Susan Westwood was also contacting the police, I suppose to cover her own tracks at this point. She then falsely reports to the operator that there were individuals attempting to break into homes in the development. God forbid Susan had brandished the weapon she claimed to own and shot one or both of the women after claiming to feel "threatened". It would not have been an unfamiliar or an exaggerated tale. These two women could have paid with their lives while waiting for a jump. They could have become a set of hashtags, their names lettered onto poster boards raised above furrowed brows. They could have become our latest reason to march enraged through the night on darkened streets as we prayed for an indictment that may or may not have come.

A flu like chill covered my body that night after watching the video footage captured by the sisters. And without warning, tears began to fall in a manner that I could not control. I turned off the light and cried myself to sleep. Waking up the next morning I still could not shake the heavy feeling on my spirit. I canceled all plans for the day and set out to find coffee and the Charlotte Observer.

Although my partner and I lived over 20 miles away at the time in Rock Hill, I drove into Charlotte towards the neighborhood I have always felt safest in. Ironically, I have always felt most comfortable in Southpark. Southpark Mall was the first place I'd found a decent job when I moved into the city in 2014, and I have worked in the area on and off ever since. It's my point of reference if I find myself for some reason without GPS guidance. It's where I most often suggest meetups for cocktails or coffee. It's where I find myself even on off days for mani/pedi appointments, shopping, or solo parking lot contemplation. I once even thought to spend the night in my car near Phillips Place shopping center when I was too bitter to go home to a former lover. I now think about all the ways that could have gone wrong even then.

I usually don't take news stories terribly personally, even those that are riddled with as much hate, racism and ignorance as this one. This time however, there is no mystery as to why I am so emotionally affected. In August of 2017, I was in the midst of an apartment hunt. Although slightly out of my price range, I began to tour apartments in the Southpark area in order to be near my job. I was thrilled with the idea of being in the neighborhood I loved so much and had worked in for so long. One of the complexes I ended up visiting was Camden Fairview. I loved the property and the apartment layout, and the Jesse Williams lookalike rental agent had me extremely excited to apply. I ended up telling Jesse however that I wanted to tour a few more places before making a final decision. A week or so later I called back ready to apply only to find out that the available unit had become occupied, so I was offered a unit in its sister property in Dilworth.

I realize that this could have very easily been me and a sister friend of mine in this exact situation with Susan. Not only because I am a Black woman as I often think about in moments such as this where there is yet another headline making its way across my digital screens, but because I was literally almost a resident of this exact community. The same community where

these two women continuously found themselves being shouted at, threatened, and being told they don't belong.

My heart broke over and over again watching the incident recording, but my reasons for my disappointment colored far beyond the lines of the obvious. I tried digging deeper in order to unearth additional causes of the pain I was feeling. What I came up with besides shock, besides sadness, besides resentment towards whitewashed feminism, was the most potent sense of betrayal. For so many years, I have served women of Southpark that are cookie cutter replicas of Susan. High class, privileged, middle aged White women. I have served these women in ways not completely unlike my great grandmother served white women in her day. Although I have not scrubbed kitchen floors or entered through back doors, I have met them in their lavish homes for personal makeup and wardrobe appointments. I have waited on them in high end boutiques and cosmetic counters. I have picked up their dry cleaning and organized their office desks.

I realize that my own privilege is that my particular brand of black girl makes my presence in White spaces more tolerable. I have lighter brown skin, a trendy yet professional way of dressing, and I consider myself to be somewhat knowledgeable on worldly topics that make for decent conversation among mixed crowds. I am confident, speak authoritatively, and can be demure when necessary. I know that my White woman to White woman referrals have been accompanied by "...and she's such a sweet and pretty black girl!" as though presenting my level of attractiveness should deem me worthy (or unworthy) enough to take on a particular gig. I know this. I have heard this with my own ears.

Let me tell you, the city of Charlotte has an ugly way of sweeping its racial divisiveness under the rug. We all know it exists but pretend not to, like the month old casserole sitting on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator that long since should have been thrown out. We can't bear to

look at it, afraid of what we may find should we peek under the foil. Best we just ignore it. But at this point, I cannot.

A week before the existence of a Southpark Susan hashtag, I was invited by my co-worker Katherine to a round table discussion on race and segregation. Katherine tells me that Mary, a close friend of hers whom I'd met once before is on the board of directors of the nonprofit Share Charlotte who served as the hosts of this year's event. From what I've researched, On The Table CLT was brought into the city from the founders at the Chicago Community Trust. The program serves as a community initiative created to promote civic engagement, extend economic opportunity, and spark necessary dialogue surrounding topics rarely discussed among diverse crowds.

On that morning I ran my errands excitedly, eager to share my lunch plans even with those who had not bothered to ask. After completing my few tasks, I thought it wise to make my way over to the site of the event so that I would not be late. I was still dressed in the last look from the photoshoot I'd directed earlier that morning. From the bottom to the top I wore red suede shoes, denim bottoms, a denim button down tied carefully at my navel, and a round kente cloth hat that I pinned neatly on top of my long braided hair. I had asked Katherine if there would be a dress code and she'd responded no, that they welcomed guests to show up just as they are. So my intentions were to do just that. But as I pulled onto the property of the Duke Mansion, positioned politely in South Charlotte between the Dilworth, Myers Park and South Park neighborhoods, I began to have a change of heart.

I sat inside my car, a small compact Hyundai sandwiched between a white BMW convertible and a champagne colored Lexus Jeep observing my surroundings. There were large trees hovering over the grounds and lush green shrubs that gated the property from being seen from the street. The house before me was massive, plantation like in its structure. I waited for

the sun to hide itself for a moment behind the branches of one tree or another, and there under the shade, I stripped.

I began by tossing my kente cloth cap into the back seat. I then quickly wriggled out of my jeans and left them discarded on the floor by the pedals. I fished out a white and navy striped knit dress from the Banana Republic bag I had planned to return it to the store in, pulled the tag off with my teeth and pulled it over my head, allowing it to drape over my neck and shoulders like a scarf. Once I was covered enough, I unbuttoned my denim blouse from beneath the dress and tossed it too into the back seat. Pulling the dress over the entirety of my body while seated was a chore, but I managed to lift my behind just enough, and shimmied the fabric down to my knees. The dress was decent but certainly did not feel like *enough*. So I grabbed the tan J. Crew blazer I had hanging over my passenger seat and added it to my look. And since red pumps just would not do, I swapped them also for a closed toe nude heel. I took a look in my rearview mirror and decided to make one last adjustment. My Zoe Kravitz inspired braids would need to be pulled up and secured into a bun, lest their swinging length startle and intimidate the other guests. And then finally, I felt less anxious. I felt confident. Tasteful. *Appropriate*. I said a quick thank you to the universe for my lack of auto tidiness leaving me with an ever rolling closet and made my way inside.

The Duke Mansion is indeed beautiful. I strolled along the brick walkway, up to the stairs and onto the checkerboard flooring of its interior. Looking up, I watched the rainbows dance alongside the chandeliers as the sun poured in through the glass windows and door frames. In my interactions with the hosts and other guests, I was initially pleased with my decision to change last minute. Here I was once again met with what I have come to regard as the Southpark standard; middle aged white women that I have been trained to give my very best

effort at impressing with my appearance and noncombative attitude. Not only had I become accustomed to it, I excelled at it.

I was urged to sign the guest book and did so while remembering my pleases and thank yous and very well, how about you. After creating a name tag that I attached to the lapel of my jacket, I was escorted into the smallish room where the event was to take place. There were five large round tables, each covered with bright white linen, and a vase of bouquet flowers at its center. Eight glasses of water were placed beside eight sets of silverware atop eight cloth napkins in front of each place setting. I selected a seat at random and watched as the small crowd began to file into every corner of the room.

Among the many faces, I did eventually start to notice distinguishable differences in the guests. There were men entering the room, two of them Black. Of these two, one was tall, thin and spectacled donning a smart blue golf sweater. The other was shorter, wider, and wore a crisp collared shirt beneath a dark navy suit jacket. There were, of course, many, many women. This aspect did not surprise me as we are commonly at the forefront of societal movements, both political and non-political. What did surprise me was the diversity in the women that I began to see. Though most of these women were still Caucasian between forty and fifty years old, I did see one or two that were much older. I saw a few near my own age. Some of the White women wore dark hair and trendy cuts, dark rimmed glasses and clever tee shirts with feminist focused messaging. There were even a few with tattoos. There was an Indigenous woman with long greying hair, a Latina woman with a full skirt of many ruffles, and three other Black women. One was much older than me, perhaps in her seventies with a nearly shaved head, and several beaded necklaces around her neck. Another was heavy set with thin red sisterlocs that swayed with her every motion. The last Black woman I'd noticed enter the room was more girlish in comparison to the rest, the same way I would have described myself I suppose. She was petite

and attractive, also with loc'd hair, and sat directly beside me at the table. With her seated so close to me, my immediate reaction was, "No! Not here! We are the only two millennial Black women in the room thus we must spread ourselves out in a way that makes it appear as though we cover a greater space!"

But I could not ask her to move, so instead, I politely asked her her name and what she did for work as people continued to mill around us making small plates of fruits, salads, and pastries. Her name was Janelle Dunlap and she told me that she worked in the city as a visual art activist. Here was Janelle, a full and true portrayal of herself among many other people that have shown up as full and true portrayals of *themselves* while I, on the other hand, had not been valiant enough to do so. I wanted to snatch my braided hair from its oppressive bun and free it over my shoulders. I wanted my crayon bright shoes back on my feet. I thought that at the very least, I could have accompanied my blazer with my own clever statement tee that gave insight into who I was as a human. A slogan that held my space in the room, maybe something bold and undeniable like; MILLENIAL BLACK QUEER FEMME.

Katherine's friend Mary soon introduced herself in the available space left in the room, and welcomed us all, thanking us for our attendance and participation. Eventually, we were presented with our topic of discussion, "The legacy of segregation in Charlotte and its continued impact." We were to host separate conversations at our tables and then open the discussion to the group at large for further dissecting. What it turned into for the most part was a telling of personal stories and a few historical references by the Charlotte natives old enough to have witnessed first hand the ways in which the city has changed over the years. There was talk of redlining, bussing and integration, poverty and discrimination. One man at my table spoke of how he came to the city in the seventies from Boston and was surprised to see how heavily segregated the city was, and how strange it was for him to see how race played such a crucial

role in day to day dealings. The black gentleman in the blue sweater who happened to be at my table spoke about his morning commute. How he was privileged enough to land his dream job uptown and how the consistency in his route made him oblivious to what took place outside of the neighborhoods he traveled through. Katherine in her ever cheerful disposition took her turn to recount unspecified moments of her childhood where she recalled racist and discriminatory behavior. And although she did not yet possess the words to express it, she felt in her heart that what she was witnessing was wrong. Janelle did not speak up much but I do remember her asking the table what they felt the next steps should be in efforts to counter this legacy. I don't however recall any solid responses being offered. I wanted to speak up too. For one, I wanted to perhaps impress Janelle with my own activism. To show her that I was not just here to take up space but to disrupt what was quiet and even comfortable for some. It crossed my mind to share my own experiences with segregation in the city. I even managed to give a brief account of what it felt like walking into a Dilworth coffee shop with a tribal print head wrap and jumbo-sized hoop earrings. It was unseasoned, without passion, and barely scratched the surface of what it was really like feeling unwanted and ill placed in a city that champions itself for its diversity.

What I actually wanted to pour out, was *the first time* I had felt Southpark betrayed me. Once when I had been in the city around two years or so, I walked along the eastern side of Southpark mall approaching the intersection of Fairview and Sharon road. As I neared the traffic light I noticed a small group of homeless white men convened by the bench where the sidewalk ended. Since I was without a car at this time, I often walked around the area before or during my work shift for one reason or another. I had recognized one of the men in this group from these walks. He was tall and elderly with a long grey beard. He often wore a baseball cap and shorts, even in the winter months. He had never appeared threatening to me. On that day, it was warm.

As the sun beamed down onto the concrete, the world appeared hazy and distorted. As my steps brought me closer to the men, I saw them look up at me, all at once as if I'd rung a doorbell to their dwelling. There was a pause in the conversation, and a shift felt that I can only compare to walking up to a group of high school bullies that want to make you aware of the fact that they see you and that they hate you. It is silent for a moment in the haze, and then the old tall man tilts his head towards the sky. Sweat prickled his face like fresh rain on a dry plant. He says unprompted, "yeah I hate niggers too." I continue walking towards them startled by his admission but needing to move past. When I am no fewer than ten feet away from the withered leader of this pack, he speaks again directly to me. "Yep. Even pretty little nigger girls like you." I continued moving forward as if that is the only motion my body is prepared for at this moment. I am shocked, angry, sick. I am in disbelief. I want to say something equally vile and offensive, but I am at a loss for words. I look back hoping the words instead find *me*, and my eyes once again meet those of the old man, daring me to confront him. His friends are still staring as well, wondering what my next move will be, but I turn away quickly, feeling outnumbered and unsafe. I shiver on the bus ride home despite the scalding heat.

I wanted to share this story with the table but was afraid that I couldn't accompany it with the smile and soft laughter that others pair with their own tales. It is dark and grim, and I could not find the rainbow like lesson in the ending. So I stayed silent as shame invites itself into my consciousness.

When the talk was over, we were offered the opportunity to explore the grounds and it's gardens. Katherine and I ventured outdoors into the midday air and near fall breezes. We took pictures among the flowers and stones, and I noticed the groundskeepers turning the soil and pushing wheelbarrows over bricks. They were all young men of my generation, two of them slightly younger than myself. One smelled immediately of ganja. They were all Black, just like

the staff that waited on us earlier. I made an effort to be seen by them and make them feel seen too. I waved and said hello to each man individually, and I wondered to myself in what ways *these* gentlemen are affected by the legacy of segregation. I wondered why these men were not among those invited to the table.

With every car that veers out of the Krispy Kreme line and drives away with its semi hot donuts, I wipe away tears knowing I'm inching closer to the window. I see the young black girl exchanging cash for baked goods and my spirit screams out to her. I want to ask her if she knows what happened over the past weekend. I want to warn her of the ways in which she is viewed by society when she is unaware. I want to shield her under my own awareness and push her out onto the front lines at the same time. I want to prepare her. I want to ask her why she is smiling while I cannot seem to keep my eyes from leaking. Instead, as I pull up to offer her my debit card, I muster up my own fragile smile and tell her thank you as she hands me my bag.

It's now been eight months since Susan Westwood confronted, harassed and threatened two black sisters in their own neighborhood. In November of last year, at the urging of her own mother, Susan turned herself into police in Sunset Beach where she apparently fled after the video went viral. She was then arrested on a misdemeanor charge of misusing the 911 system and was also charged for communicating threats and simple assault. This past February, the first hearing was held in the case. After this preliminary hearing, local news crew cameras followed Susan out of the courtroom and onto the sidewalks where they attempted to question her in the way that journalists are expected to do. I thought that Susan may pause, turn into the lens of just one of the cameramen and take this opportunity to apologize publicly not only to the women she harassed but to everyone who she offended with her words and with her abuse of

privilege. Instead, she displayed the same hostility we'd seen from her in October, leading myself and others to believe that her behavior is not of an isolated incident due to alcoholic consumption.

On Wednesday, June 5th, 2019, Susan Westwood plead guilty to two counts of simple assault and one count for the misuse of the 911 system. She has been sentenced to one year of unsupervised probation and must additionally attend community meetings and actively participate in meetings of the White People Caucus, an affiliate of Organizing Against Racism where members work to "examine and deconstruct racial superiority." I was not expecting anything more than the punishment that was dealt out to Susan, but it is in no way approximate to the level of reform that she would actually require. There are people currently locked in cages for moments of poor judgment, for drunken mistakes, the same reasoning that Susan might cite in regards to her actions that night in October. But this would not comfort me, nor would it comfort the Garris sisters. I believe that Susan Westwood is not just racist in some of her beliefs and behaviors, but that she *is* a racist. It is of her, it is in her, like a disease that can not be extracted from her being.

I am contented, albeit surprised that her actions were met with these types of ramifications. To be honest, I was surprised that there were any at all besides that of being dragged through Black Twitter and the rest of the social media. Almost immediately after the video was released by the sisters, she was fired from her job at Spectrum, and she was also evicted from the South Park apartment she was so proud of. I do not offer my sympathy towards Susan but I do feel for her children. I thought of them, her Myers Park High students, the weekend after the incident. I thought of how they might be met with ridicule come Monday morning after a video has been spread around of their drunken mother spewing hatred at women of color. I thought of the ways this could end up affecting them for years to come. I

thought of how growing up in a household where racist ideologies are present may come to shape them as adults. My prayer for these children, although I am unsure of their exact ages, would be that they learn from the erroneous ways of their mother Susan. That they quickly step into full awareness of their privilege, and that they use this privilege to serve the light of good in this world, and not the forces of evil.