

Dear Judges,

My inspiration for this epistolary piece is from *Brownstones*, a painted portrait of Harlem, New York, by Jacob Lawrence. After thinking about the scene in the painting, I decided which character's life I would like create. The reason I picked the girl in the red dress was because of her body position. Since she was turned around, I could develop whatever expression I imagined for her. After some research of Harlem in the 1930's, I began to create her diary. The idea of writing in epistolary format came from my own diary entries that I write every night. I figured this would allow her to connect more with the audience because it would be 100% honesty. Though my character's life does not reflect my own, I do feel a mental and emotional connection with her. I enjoyed writing this piece and I hope you enjoy reading it.

Sincerely,

Kyla S. Dickson

One Thing I Know About Life Is That Is You Gotta Keep Yo Mouth Shut

I play, but I keep my head away
I don't look out, in the streets
I fear they might read my face,
My thoughts, my secrets
The secrets mama says I can't tell
Because what happens in this house
Stays in this house

June 6th 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

Today was like any other day in Harlem. Hot. The weather here is burning, Gram. I jump rope with Rhonda, but all I wanted to do was jump into a pool. Daddy say he gonna take me and Johnny to the pool on Saturday cause that's his day off from the factory. Mama gonna pack us a picnic and it gonna be real nice, real nice, Gram. Wish you could join us and all, but I bet you cooler in heaven anyway. Wish you were here though, in Harlem. Its real nice here. I do miss home though. Daddy moved so fast after you died. He didn't stay not one week after the funeral. He claim he moved for the job offer here, but I think he had more time to accept. I guess he still heartbroken about yo death Gram. You did die so fast though. Not even 6 months after Grandpa. They say old folks die right after each other, but its ok though, we still talk, well I talk to you, but I know you listen to me. Like you said, even after death, you will all ways hear me. Did you know you was gonna die Gram? I thinks you did cause use you was always talkin bout, "It's my time soon baby girl." Is that why you gave me this notebook, so I can write to you in heaven? I don't know why, but I love it, so thank you.

June 7th, 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

I'm scared. I know you always told me to be strong, but Grandma I'm scared. Mama said that Uncle Rick is coming from Georgia to live with us. He lookin for a factory job. But Grama, he gonna be in the same house as me. Mama always told me not to tell, but I don't like what Uncle Rick does to me. He hurts me Gram. He does the thing that I don't like. He makes me cry Gram. You were the only one who protected me from Uncle Rick, and now he is coming in the house. Gram, I wanna run away. I told mama just like you asked of me, but she say I was lying, only seeking my daddy's attention. Uncle Rick is not a good man, not a good man at all, but she just letting him come. Gram he gonna hurt me, hurt me bad too. Mama said this only happens to bad girls, but I swear I been good, all my life. I been doing right. You always told me to pray to God, but I don't think he hear me sometime. Can you make sure he hears me every day, Gram? I pray around 8:30, sometimes 9pm. Can you ask him to tune in then? Maybe he might catch it. Gram, can you pray for me too? I know you made it to heaven and all, but can you still pray for us on Earth?

June 9th, 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

Today, daddy took me and Johnny to the pool. It was real nice Gram. You would have liked it. People here is different, not as bad as them folks down in Mississippi. They kinder. The water at the pool was so blue. Nothing like them lakes back home. It was crowed there, but everyone got along. Mamma packed some good sandwiches, but nothing like yours. You always knew how to make 'em. I sure do miss you. I feel like you should be here on Earth with me. This morning I was mad at God, I say "God why you take Gram away. She ain't done nothing wrong. Don't madder that she old. Miss Lilly bout ninety three and she still livin'." God didn't reply cause I

still got no answer to ma question. I still feel like he don't hear me cause Uncle Rick still comin'. Gram you say God is always there to protect me. He watchin' down from heaven on me. Well why is it that if God protect me, my Uncle who hurt me still comin. Gram, I told you before I'm scared of him. He always touchin' me in places I don't like. Bad places. Mama say he comin' on June the 16th. I don't wanna have him hear Gram. Why can't you be here to protect me? Why God not here to protect me? Can he hear me?

June 10th, 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

Today it rained all out there. I was so gloomy out there. It looked sadder than Chile's face when we left Mississippi. I talk to Aunt May this mornin'. She said that Chile is doing better since we left. He's runnin around, playin around with Cousin Ken now, so he probably don't even miss me or Johnny. He probably forgot about us. Everybody probably forgot about us. I miss home Gram. I miss everything about it. The smell, the people, everything. Mama said that Harlem is more *sophisticated* than Mississippi, but since I don't even know what that means I don't care. On a day like this in Mississippi, Sue and I would get all dressed up and show our stuff. We would run in that fields, play in the rain, get yelled at by Miss Johnson or my mama, but at the end of the day, we would have fun. Harlem is nice and all, but the rain got us stuck in this apartment. Nobody on the street unless they have to be. It seem to be rainin cats and dogs like you say. Maybe I'll go read the bible. I remember you told me all my answers come out of it, so maybe I'll try looking. I got nothing else to do, and it seems like God not listen to me up there. Maybe he wants me to solve my own problem. I'll go start with that. ♥ you Gram!

June 11th 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

I'm so mad right now. Mama said I have to go help the old lady across the street. Her name is Miss Abele. With all the cigarette butts, and ashtrays in her house, I'm shocked God hasn't taken her yet. Mama said she want me to get out the house and help Miss Abele with some house work. I don't wanna help that lady. Gram, she crazy. I don't know what it is, but she not the norm. Not at all, not at all. She yells out her windows, crazy things to people passing by. I guess the neighborhood is use to it, cause all they do is say, "Hi Miss. Abele," and "Hope you have fine day." I think this is punishment Gram. This ain't fair, but let me go for mama come up these stairs and tell me for the last time to get my black ass out this house.

Gram I was wrong about Miss. Abele. She not crazy, she is psychotic (heard Cousin Mike use that word to describe his lady friend one time). No wonder she alone. When I arrived, she already had chores for me to do. Miss Abele, I later found out, is not as old as she looks. She bout sixty-eight years of age, yet she can't do her own chores. I'm not her kin therefore I am not obligated (daddy said this word to mama when he was talkin bout family) to do her work. All she did was sit on her butt and read books. Shock she can read. Most old colored folks cant.

June 15th 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

Today is the last day. Uncle Rick gonna arrive here tomorrow. Daddy gonna go pick him up from the train station bout 6pm. Mama excited to see Uncle Rick. She love her big brother so much, even thought he be hurting me. I don't understand her sometimes. Normally Johnny would be excited to, but he was kinda quiet today. Maybe it hasn't hit him yet. I gotta fake my excitement for mama and daddy or they would know something was up. Uncle Rick gonna stay on the top level with me and Johnny. There is a guest room up there for him. Today, mama spent

the whole day dusting, and cleaning in that one room. She put the curtains up and everything, getting it all ready for her eldest. I don't know why mama love him so much. Daddy say that's the type of love you have with your sibling, but he don't have that love for Aunt May or Aunt Sara. He love um but nothing like mama and Uncle Rick. I don't even love Johnny that much. I heard the old folk say that when you been with someone through hard times that your love for that person grows. Well mama and Uncle Rick muss have been through a hurricane with that kinda love. Anyway, Uncle Rick's room across the hall from mine, and next to Johnny, so maybe he might stay away...I don't know Gram... I just don't....

June 16th 1932

Dear Grandma Camille,

Daddy brought Uncle Rick home today. I gave him a hug, only cause of mama's stare. I smelt the moonshine off his breath as he embraced me with such an open hug. He asked me how I was doin, and I keep it simple, "Fine." My only thought was to leave the room as soon as I could. Trying to hold our breath, Me and Johnny took Uncle Rick stuff to the guest room. Uncle Rick loves to smoke, but not as much as he loves to drink. Boy, does he love his liquor, but according to daddy, he can't hold it.

Tonight is the first night Gram. I prayed so long on my knees Gram, they red. All I said was God, don't let nothing happen to me, please. Please. Please God, watch over me.

The smoky scent of his clothes brush against my face
When I
Went to hug him.
I hate smokers.
I hate them almost as much as I hate drinkers.
The smell of his voice sent
Shivers up my spine
Tremble in my veins
Stillness in my blood.
I fear the night that is yet to come

The fear of his presence has begun...