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Finishing the Statement

We know the color of our skin, yet when we go out into the world, we do not need to be afraid to feel like we're equal to anyone else. In Christ we are excellent, and we can compete with the very best," I voiced with pride to my brown classmates.

Although that sounded arrogant, I knew it was true. We all fall short of excellence, but God is perfect. Thanks to His presence in a sinful me, I can claim His goodness.

Continuing, I encouraged, "And because of His love for us, we can be all that anyone else can be. And don't misunderstand: I'm not even saying we're better because we're black; I'm saying because we're saved, because Jesus' blood is running through us, we can overcome any obstacle that is before us. We can climb over mountains that will be hard to climb, and we can get through valleys that are deep and depressing, and we can achieve. Just remember to seek ye first, and my prayer, as I close, is that all of your dreams will be given. Thanks."

It was weird receiving a standing ovation, especially when I didn't even know that Pastor McClep was going to put me on the spot. He had asked me to stand before my graduating class and give a baccalaureate speech. I didn't know what I was going to say but it just came. It came naturally. Our past. Our present. Our future. Words of wisdom from God flowed to my lips, to say to my friends that we are to be congratulated. And as they saluted me, I humbly accepted the praise, and applauded them in return.

"Let's give her another round of applause," my pastor said as I was taking my seat. "We're really proud of you, Payton, really proud of you."

Humbly I smiled. "Thank you, Sir."

At that moment, I felt loved by my parents, my peers, and even myself. I was proud of me, and I so hoped God was as well. I had a lot to learn, but I was working towards it. And although I had failed in several areas in my life, like being angry at God and choosing lust over the love of Christ, I hoped I had become a stronger person for my mistakes.

After the service, I went down to the reception hall, and was greeted first by Tad Taylor, a guy who I wasn't even sure was my boyfriend or my good friend. Either way, I had serious feelings for him that ran deep as the ocean's bottom. He reached over and planted a sweet peck on my cheek.

"We're proud of you, lady. That was an awesome speech. You want some punch?"

"Yeah, that would be great," I told him.

"Cool . . . I'll be right back."

"So, what's up? You gon' be a motivational speaker or something?" my girlfriend Dymond joked.

It was so good to be with my friends. I hugged Dymond Johnson, Rain Crandle, and Lynzi Brown really tight, for in the back of my mind, I knew that pretty soon the four of us wouldn't be together. We would go on from this place and

hear our names called in a couple days, get our diplomas, spend our summers in different places, and hopefully come back together once more to get ready for school and depart for different destinations. At least Lynzi and I would be off to the same university.

I just hoped our future would never take us to places where we'd be marrying men with different interests, living in cities far away, and having careers that wouldn't allow reunions. All of that would hinder us from being close like this again. However, I couldn't and didn't know the future, so I held on extra tight, and in my mind thanked God for friends like these in high school. The past four years with them had been a blast.

"Oooh, yo' church got a spread," Lynzi said, cracking a smile.

"Well, I see the patient has gotten better."

"Yeah, I'm still a little weak. I can't stand up too long, but I can definitely say I'm on the right track."

This was a day of blessings. My crazy friend, Lynzi, had had a horrible car accident just a few short weeks ago. No one thought she would survive that ordeal. The God I know and love is truly a miracle worker. As I stood there and looked at the miracle before me, I came to understand God even better.

Mr. and Mrs. Perry Skky Sr., my parents, started walking toward my girlfriends and me. The smile on their faces made me feel good inside.

My dad is a successful automobile dealer and my mom is a "domestic engineer." Though she stays at home, she is very active in the community. It is her forte. She is a success in her own right, raising lots of money for several causes that wouldn't have made it without her. She always makes sure to give God the credit, though. I knew my parents were proud of me. Mom's humility and my dad's business sense are what make me proud of them. Seeing their

eyes shine with accomplishment for who I had become made me feel good all over.

My dad reached out and gave me a hug. My mom kept smiling. Although they didn't tell me, for once in my life I knew I had done OK. Where I would go from here was uncertain. Where I had been to get to this point was quite crazy, especially this last year. But for one shining moment, I was glad they were glad that I had done OK.

"You'd better c'mon," my brother, Perry, said to me in haste later that afternoon. "Yo' boys about to fight."

I had no clue what he was talking about. Perry had been known to exaggerate, but this time his actions of haste seemed as if something was up. I followed him to the church parking lot, where I saw Tad and Dakari, my ex-boyfriend, all up in each other's faces.

"Oh no, see, we're not having this," I stepped in between them and said. "We're on church grounds and y'all acting like y'all in the streets somewhere. I'm not gon' have my parents, my pastor, or anybody come out here and see y'all actin' crazy. Don't trip!"

"You think I was about to fight him?" Tad said.

"I don't know what's going on. All I know is that y'all are getting loud; my brother comes to get me, and y'all confronting each other and stuff. I mean, what else am I suppose to think? The two of you are best friends? Tuh, I don't think so! It's obvious y'all can't even be in the same room. At least be cordial enough to enjoy the same air. What is this about?"

"Man . . . it ain't nothin' . . . it ain't nothin'," Dakari said.

"Yeah, you right, it's nothin'." Tad attacked verbally. "You step to me like that again, we gon' have some problems. That's all I have to say."

Both of them were tight-lipped about what it was that had the two of them upset. It kinda bothered me. I really wondered what was up. Tad came over and kissed me on the cheek, sorta abruptly, and said he'd call me later. Then Tad disappeared. Dakari simply left the scene without even saying good-bye.

As I watched the cute guy of my past walk away, our history came to mind. He had been the one that held my heart for most of my high school days. However, in the beginning of our senior year, he decided since I wasn't putting out, he wasn't going to put up with me. He dissed me for another girl. A girl who started meeting some of his physical needs. I am grateful he broke up with me because I kept my virginity. Also, I found and fell for a wonderful guy, Tad Taylor. However, seeing my ex get in his car, seeing Dakari Ross Graham driving away . . . I knew the connection was still there.

"Girl, you better get over that," Lynzi came up behind me and exclaimed.

"See, why you all up in my business? This ain't about you."

"Well, it don't need to be about Dakari. For real. For real."

"I don't know, Lynzi. I don't think it's about Dakari. I just think that for some reason he still means something."

"But what about Tad?" she questioned.

That was a good question. What about Tad? I had to truly ask myself. What was up? If I cared about Tad, why would Dakari even still be an issue? Why all the guy drama anyway? I should be focused on what's about to come in my life, but when I thought about college, I couldn't get rid of the two of them, because the three of us were all going to the same college, the University of Georgia.

"You gon' have a lot of trouble next year at school," Lynzi said, reading my mind.

“Yeah, you’re right, but at least I’ll have you there.”

“Um, that’s kinda what I wanted to talk to you about. Girl, I’m joining the army. I just need some discipline in my life. I need some structure. I’m not ready for college yet. I don’t even know what it is I wanna be.”

I couldn’t say anything. A part of my heart just sank. Not going to school with Lynzi! She was my girl. I was counting on her to be my roommate at Georgia. Lynzi not going? I couldn’t comprehend the thought.

“Ahhh, don’t even act like that,” she said after seeing the dejection on my face. “You’ll be fine.”

Since I exempted my exams, I was helping my teacher, Mrs. Guice, take down some of the boards in her room—trying to make graduation come faster, I guess. Though I should have been relaxing, my mind was weighed down with many different things: college, guys, and expectations. I was so burdened with stuff.

My thoughts were interrupted when the frail Caucasian woman in her midfifties called out to me. “Payton, hon, as I sit here looking at you, you pretty thing, I’m just at a loss for words.” It was funny seeing her all emotional. Although she was tiny, she was a powerful lady. She kept all of us on our p’s and q’s. I had never seen this side of Mrs. Guice, and I didn’t know how to respond, so I just sat there, waiting for her to open up.

After taking a deep breath, she said, “When I came to this school fifteen years ago, I had apprehensions. You know, me being a young white lady teaching at a school that was predominantly black was very tough on me, but I overcame that and learned we are all the same. You opened my eyes. I really never met an African-American young lady who had as much poise and class and style as you.”

Mrs. Guice was silent after saying all that. I guess she was waiting on a response from me. My teacher was just staring.

At first I was a little hesitant. Kinda rubbed me the wrong way. I had just completed a debutante ball, where there were fifty girls who had poise and style and were “all that.” Not because we were African-American women, but just because. Still, I was able to accept her comment in the way that it was meant—as a compliment and not a critique. However, I still didn’t know what to say. I, too, was at a loss for words. I just smiled and took it in.

When the bell rang for school to be over, I headed out the door on my way home. I was planning on going to the senior movie night. First I needed to change clothes, get a bite to eat, and pick up my girls. Before I got to my jeep, Dakari pulled up in front of me in a fly, red hot Ferrari.

“Please get in. We really need to talk,” he pleaded.

I was hesitant and didn’t move. He stopped his brother’s car in the middle of the street. He got out. He came around. He opened the other door and practically put me in the new car.

“You got some nerve,” I told him when he started driving me away.

“I apologize for being so abrupt, but we need to settle some things. I just wanted to talk to you and let you know what was really going on. I needed to tell you what was up before yo’ boy got to you, and you know . . . just messed up your mind. I wanted you to hear from me what was up.”

“What are you talking about?” I uttered, in a state of confusion.

“I’m talking about what we were discussing yesterday at your church. Um, I just wanna tell you what we were talking about because I think you should hear it from me. It might sound offensive if it comes from anyone else. And that’s not the way it is intended. I care . . . I really care about

you, and I don't want to throw away whatever it is we got 'cause somebody tells you something I said and misrepresents me."

I leaned back against the car door. My seat belt was still on, but yet, I was turned, and I was just checking the brother out. He was trippin'. He was really worrying about something that didn't seem so serious to me. Tad hadn't even called me last night, so obviously it wasn't that big a deal, or was it? Did Dakari upset Tad so much that he couldn't even call?

"You better slow down. You're going mighty fast," I said to Dakari as we drove through historic Augusta.

"I got this; just listen because this is major. Basically, I just told the guy that he might say he's all holy roly and everything, and that the sex stuff might not be an issue, but, um, the more he hangs around you . . . I mean, I'm a man . . . I know it's gon' be an issue, and I told him he better not compromise you in any way. 'Cause if there's any disrespecting going on, then it's gon' be me and him."

I was digesting the information and Dakari was still speeding. Before anything could be uttered or exchanged between the two of us, lights started flashing from behind. We got pulled over by a cop who wasn't too friendly. The guy had Dakari outside the car with his hands on top of the hood. Yes, Dakari was speeding, but all the roughness and the hard-core treatment, I felt, was way too premature. Especially since Dakari was extremely respectful to the officer.

I couldn't help but feel that this was one of those race incidents because the cop was white and Dakari was black. Driving While Black is a serious issue. I just never experienced it until now. And I felt that moment was D. W. B. because of the circumstances and negative vibes we were getting from the cop. Not because I feel all cops are racist, but because this one had no regard for my friend's welfare.

The cop confirmed it when he ignorantly uttered out of

his mouth: “You people do this all the time. Thinking you can get away with this or that. I don’t know; y’all are always carrying weapons, I have to protect myself. Get out the car, and don’t say one word, ’cause if you do, then you’ll be in jail like the rest of your . . . what do y’all call it? Brothas and sistahs.”

I knew Dakari wanted to go off. I knew he wanted to say so many things. So did I, but I was scared. The cop was an authority and even though he was wrong, he had the upper hand. I just kept praying quietly to myself. So many times over the last couple of days, I wanted to say something but didn’t know quite what to say. I told Dakari to keep his mouth shut. Sometimes words aren’t necessary. You just have to pray and let God handle it. Sometimes you don’t have to have the answers. Sometimes you can’t say what you really feel. You just have to let the Holy Spirit take control. At that horrific moment when so much of me was dying to come out, I realized that in life you won’t always be finishing the statement.



Calling My Name

*P*ayton . . . PAYTON, call my brother! He's at my house," Dakari yelled as the cop jerked both his hands behind him.

"What did you do, young man, steal this car?" Officer Briggs interrogated. "There's no tag on the back. You can't find any registration for me. Where'd you get it from? Is the young lady involved? I know it's not yours; you're too young to have a job."

"Oh, my gosh . . . oh, my gosh. What's his number? What's his number?" I said in a state of panic.

I was watching the cop harass my friend. I couldn't even remember Dakari's number, which, back in the day, I used to dial all the time. All of a sudden Dakari's pager went off. I decided to dial the number that came up on the screen. I remembered Dakari saying he had to meet back up with his brother to switch cars. Logic and hope told me it just had to be Drake. So I called the number.

“Man, give me my ride,” Drake yelled into the receiver thinking it was Dakari.

“No, no Drake, this is Payton. Payton Skky, your brother’s friend.”

“Payton? Heeyyy, little lady, what’s up? He told me that you overheard our conversation that night. I want to apol . . .”

“No. No. No. We don’t have time for all that.” I cut him off and said, “Dakari’s in trouble. He’s really in big trouble.”

I gave him the directions and told him to get to us quickly. I told him that if he didn’t get there soon, both Dakari and I might be behind bars. That’s just how crazy this cop seemed to me. When I got off the phone, Dakari’s left cheek was smeared into the shiny red hood. Both hands were clasped tightly behind his head.

“Lord,” I prayed, “I know every person in the world isn’t prejudiced, but I do know this cop that’s with Dakari now ain’t on the up-and-up. You know what I’m saying. Help us before he hurts us. Hear this prayer, Lord. Please, hear this prayer.”

No sooner than I finished praying did Drake pull up in Dakari’s ride, an old Corvette. Treasured by many but it was in a whole different league from the Ferrari we were in.

“Watch your back back now, son,” the gut-bulging, red-cheeked man said to Drake.

“Oh, sir, I don’t want no trouble,” Drake attested, throwing his hands up in the air. “My name is Drake Graham, just graduated from the University of Georgia. I’m on my way to go to the Falcons’ training camp in a couple of months. Just signed an NFL contract. No trouble, sir. No trouble from me.”

“Drake Graham! You’re Drake Graham,” the cop totally changed his voice and said. “I’m a big Bull Dawg fan. Went to Georgia. Kids went to Georgia. I’ve been watching you all year. Linebacker. Dang, you can hit.”

“So what’s the trouble, Officer? Can you let my lil’ brother up?” Drake asked with total composure, as if the cop were

a friend.

“Your brother? This is your brother? Ohhh, OK . . . OK,” the cop said as he lifted his hand from Dakari’s face and dusted off his back.

There was no relief in my ex-boyfriend’s eyes. They were bloodshot red. Only rage and hate. Though it wasn’t olden times, like the times my great-great-grandmother talked about, working for the “massa,” it sure felt like it. Drake smoothed everything over, and the cop apologized time and time again. It wasn’t enough for me, and I could tell it surely wasn’t enough for Dakari, but Drake felt it was best to leave the situation alone. *Where’s the justice in that?* I thought.

Yes, I understood that every cop wasn’t this way, but for the ones that are, how are we ever going to get rid of them? How are we going to challenge them to uphold the law and treat everyone equally? If we don’t prosecute and don’t stand up for what’s right, they get away with stuff like this. And the next brotha might not have an NFL brotha. The next brotha pulled over because of D.W. B. might be found D.O.A. But it wasn’t my call to make. So, we switched cars with Drake, and Dakari took me home.

“Dakari . . . Dakari, talk to me.” I tried to get him to open up.

He was so upset, so frustrated he couldn’t even speak. His growing manhood was shattered. I could only hope, as I watched tears drip from his face like a running faucet, that he’d be able to shake this thing and get back to normal.

The next day was the day I’d waited for since kindergarten. I was a graduate. I was about to accomplish something great. I was about to get papers that would tell me I could move on. We were supposed to wear white dresses under our caps and gowns. However, no one really seemed

to care. Jeans and white T-shirts are what we all agreed as a class to wear. And, although it was silly, I just had to participate. One more fun thing for the road.

I had never worn jeans and pumps before. White pumps at that. It wasn't a cute outfit, but it was cute that we all did it. Trust me, it was a fashion fad that would fade real fast—like right after graduation.

When I was on the coliseum floor, I looked up to find my family. When I spotted them, I was surprised to see so many of my kinfolk: aunts, uncles, cousins. I was especially surprised to see my first cousin, Pillar. Seeing her was a little much. I never expected to see her at my graduation. Pillar and I didn't have much of a relationship.

If I remember correctly, Pillar had just gotten out of school. For her to get out of school and come all the way from Denver for me just seemed a little much to believe. But, nonetheless, there she was in the stands. Maybe our last visit, since it was pleasant, erased all those years of distance. Maybe the two of us could be friends, after all. We couldn't do anything about being family, but we were always able to avoid being friends. Maybe now that would change.

With Dymond being our valedictorian and all, I was saddened to see her face before the ceremony. She wasn't happy at first and none of us knew why. Then I remembered. When we were all standing outside to line up, Fatz had been nowhere to be found.

Finally Lynzi asked Dymond, "Where is Fatz? He's going to miss walking in."

She said with exhaustion and depression, "He's not gonna be able to graduate right now. He failed some class, and he's gotta take it this summer, and they won't let him walk."

"Are you serious?" I probed.

Rain interjected, "That's awful, girl."

"See . . . now they know they could have let that boy walk," Lynzi said powerfully.

“It’s a lot of people missing,” Dy informed us.

Actually, it was quite sad. And not just his situation. Dymond was correct that the majority of our senior class wasn’t walking for one reason or another. Out of three hundred and something kids, we only had a little over a hundred walking. Administration didn’t do their job. Parents didn’t do their job. Seniors surely didn’t do their job . . . well, maybe the buck should stop with me. Not that I’m sooo smart, but surely instead of all the parties we had throughout the year, I should have been encouraging my buddies to get in their books. But I didn’t know. Everybody procrastinates. Sooner or later what’s done in the dark comes to light.

Dymond explained that at least there was a good side to Fatz’s situation. With summer school he’d go on to college next year. But most people who weren’t going to be graduating were going to have to repeat the twelfth grade. That wasn’t good. Four years of high school was enough. Who’d want more?

Glancing over at Dakari, I could tell the incident that had happened the day before with the mean cop was still weighing heavily on his mind. He was there but not there. He was seated but somewhere else. He was with us in body only. When I finally got his attention, I put my hands on my chin and gestured up to the sky. He slightly smiled, yet I knew he wasn’t himself.

Sitting and waiting for my name to be called, I flashed back to a few days before, and sadness came over my face as well. I had been at Tad’s graduation, and everything was going great. I was sitting with his family. They were all very proud, as was I. Then out of nowhere, his grandmother passed out. She had a heart attack right there, and unfortunately, unlike my grandfather a few months back, she didn’t make it.

I remember watching her not three feet in front of me.

All her kids around her. Tad's mom was one of ten, and all of them were present for his big day. Sadly, it ended up being his grandmother's farewell.

Her last words were, "Calling my name. Love y'all. I hear Him calling my name."

As I became emotional thinking of Tad's grandmother, my silly friend, Lynzi, did a crazy thing. She folded one of the programs into an airplane and threw it my way. It landed right in my face. When I looked up, she had a grin, pointing towards the stands. My inward tears turned into a smile. It was Tad, and in everything he had going on, he was there. He had come to share in my day and because I saw him, I felt ready to accept my diploma.

I was so proud of my girl, Dymond. Valedictorian, on her way to Howard with a full paid scholarship. Against the odds she had done it. And her last words to our senior class that day were so challenging.

"You know," Dymond began. "The projects . . . black . . . poor . . . uneducated parents. When the world says you can't because of your circumstances and your situation, rise above it. Folks, I did. I stand here before my class, not bragging that I'm here, but happy that I'm here because I worked hard for it. Days I studied extra hard to be here, and as we take it up another notch, those of us going to college, remember to work hard for what you want. And don't let anyone kill your dreams."

She received a standing ovation. So she should have. Not only did she work hard, but she motivated me several times to stay in the books rather than go to the mall. All four of us special friends were smart, but she was naturally gifted, and I was so proud of her. Proud that she had defeated the odds.

Dr. Franklin went up to the podium and said, "Now you

guys go out into the world. Make something of yourselves. This young lady just stood here and told you ‘no excuses.’ Results, man, results. Several of your classmates aren’t even sitting here today. Don’t fall victim to your circumstances. Rise above them, no matter what they are. This is only a milestone, a first step to where and what you can be. Do all, be all, take all you’ve learned here and soar. Higher than anyone else ever expects you to. And know that we’re behind you. You can always come here for encouragement. To the graduating class of Lucy Laney High School—be great!”

“Payton Autumn Skky” was announced over the loud-speaker.

That was me. I stepped across in a daze. Was this really real? Was this moment finally here? Was I about to graduate?

I looked towards heaven and silently said, *Some things in life we don’t deserve. I know I worked hard, but because You were here with me, this moment is here and it’s real and it’s mine, and I thank You for it. I know You’ll be with me next year as I go to college. I just pray I don’t leave You. ’Cause just like the “Footprints” prayer, sometimes when I look back on my high school years, and I only saw one set of footprints, turns out You were carrying me, Lord. But now I’m standing here beside You about to accept a diploma and embrace it as my own.*

I looked then at Dr. Franklin and knew life was good. I wasn’t dreaming. My principal was most definitely calling my name.