

I.

A heavy snowstorm assaulted the Eastern United States on the weekend of December 18, 2009, stretching its white tendrils from the heart of Appalachia to the heights of New England. The siege lasted from late Friday night to early Sunday morning, dumping a record 21 inches of snow on the hard scrabble city of Baltimore, Maryland.

Tarik Baxter stepped outside his Northeast Baltimore rowhome with shovel in gloved hand that Sunday morning. He stood underneath the awning that overlooked his narrow front steps, taking a moment to survey all that the white beast had left in its wake. A mountainous sheet of snow stretched from his post to span the entire length of his walkway. It camouflaged the steps leading to the sidewalk, buried the sidewalk, and blanketed the narrow street. Tarik sighed once before stooping and pushing the shovel into the mound of snow that lined his front door. He was delighted to discover that the substance was soft and pliable.

It took him roughly 45 minutes to clear a path from his front steps to the sidewalk and another half hour to clear his car of snow. A scan of

his eyes revealed that his neighbors had already started putting out those damn lawn chairs.

After a grunt of "good morning," he complained to his wife of the practice that he found so terribly annoying. "I just don't get it," he grumbled, seated next to her at the dinner table in their small dining room. Plates of turkey sausage patties, grits, and glasses of orange juice lined the cloth covered tabletop. "People holding parking spaces with chairs. If they want their own parking, they should buy houses with driveways or garages."

Maliah smiled at him kindly. "If they could afford that, they wouldn't be living around here. Now eat your breakfast, honey. You need to get your strength back after all that hard work."

"It wasn't that hard, babe," Tarik said, leaning over to peck his wife on the cheek. "That snow was as soft as a baby's bottom."

She giggled. "When was the last time you touched a baby's bottom?"

Tarik chuckled to keep from ruining her good humor, but her joke only served as a cruel reminder that they didn't have a child and might not be able to have one soon, at least not if they wanted to be reasonable and responsible. Maliah had been pregnant two and a half

years prior to this frigid morning. They enjoyed the happiest five months of their marriage, never suspecting that a barrage of misfortune would bring that happiness to a depressing end.

Tarik was 31 and Maliah was 30 at the time, late in the spring of 2007. She earned \$45,000 per year working as a mental health therapist for a woman's advocacy organization, while he bought home \$51,000 as a software engineer. They had married and taken an extravagant honeymoon in the Canary Islands during the previous August, moving into the two-bedroom home they now occupied a month later. It was intended to be their starter home, something they'd fix up and sell or rent for profit when they were ready to move into their dream home in a few years.

Yes, Tarik thought, pushing the sausage on his plate around with his fork. We had it all planned.

"What's wrong, Tarik?" Maliah asked, noticing his disinterest in his food. "Is something bothering you?"

He laughed. "No, baby. Just thinking about something. It's nothing important." He lifted the juicy patty to his mouth and took a big bite.

"Mmmm. This sausage sure is good."

"Don't thank me," she said, lifting her glass of orange juice. "Thank Jimmy Dean. And Super Wal-Mart."

Tarik plopped down onto the living room couch and tried to relax after breakfast. The attempt failed as he fell into aimless channel surfing. Every local and national news channel on his limited Comcast cable service droned unceasing reports of the record Nor'easter, throwing in a side order of prognostications of how the voluminous snow and impending ice would affect citizens and businesses in the coming days.

"I already know how this shit is going to affect us," he grumbled as Maliah settled in next to him. "It's going to take money that we sorely need from our pockets. I bet schools will be closed all next week. Substitutes already don't get paid for the Christmas holiday. I won't have a check at the beginning of January."

"We'll be alright, honey." Maliah placed a hand on his arm. "We still have my unemployment check. And you could always pay the mortgage late next month."

Tarik nodded. "Yeah, I guess I could. I could always pay the mortgage late, again!" He chuckled. "I guess that's better than not paying the mortgage at all."

"You're damn right it is," Maliah said, her previously kind voice growing stern.

The star crossed spouses usually went to church or watched the service online on Sundays, but they were not surprised to find that their place of worship was not functioning in any manner on this day. They had nothing in particular to do and no desire to travel the snow entombed roads just yet, so they chose to pass time by adjourning to the bedroom.

As Tarik enjoyed his wife, he tried not to think of the condom he wore because they couldn't risk Maliah getting pregnant without any medical benefits. Maliah's previous miscarriage, anemia, and hormonal issues meant that any pregnancy would be high risk. They had no faith in the pre-natal care offered by free clinics and similar organizations. Even if such care did prove sufficient, how would they provide for the child after the child's birth? Their only income was his substitute/ part time bookstore employee earnings and her unemployment benefits,

benefits that she seemed likely to exhaust before finding a job. What were they supposed to do- apply for welfare?

We're not going to get food stamps or an independence card or anything like that, Tarik thought. Not with both of us having master's degrees. I'm not ready to stoop that low.

The physical pleasure of sex won a pitched battle to banish those worries from Tarik's mind. He and Maliah slept for a while afterward, curling up against each other like a pair of kittens nestled against a mother cat's belly. They spent the balance of the day watching television and web surfing after awakening. They followed that evening's dinner by getting drunk off a mixture of Bacardi flavored rum and cranberry juice. The alcohol provided fuel for the sloppy sex that put them to sleep for the night.

II.

Tarik awoke at 6 am as usual on Monday, nursing the absurd hope that schools might open late instead of being closed for the day. Just as the rational part of him knew it would, the delays and closings ticker at the bottom of the screen for his local station dashed his hopes.

Tarik kissed his still sleeping wife and stepped outside to get the newspaper, noticing that his block now teemed with lawn chairs. Every length of the street where no car was parked, from the north end to the south end of the block and on both sides, had either one or two chairs guarding what should have been an empty spot.

I hate this fucking shit, Tarik thought. Everybody trying to claim territory they have no right to. It's illegal to reserve street parking without a permit.

He could have understood if it took hours for each of his neighbors to dig out their cars, but he knew firsthand that digging out had been easy. Besides, he'd noticed in the past few years that city residents were now in the habit of putting out chairs at the slightest dusting of snow.

The most ridiculous thing about the irritating practice was that people weren't necessarily placing chairs in front of the space closest to their front door. How could somebody expect to claim parking territory five doors down from their own house?

That Monday seemed to drag on forever. Neither Tarik nor his wife wanted to drive anywhere because the snow on the unplowed side streets that comprised their immediate neighborhood had frozen into

ramps of ice overnight. They had nowhere in particular to go, anyway. It wasn't like a workplace awaited either of them. They ended up passing the time much as they had on the previous day.

III.

The frigid weather warmed up a little on Tuesday. Tarik thought it strange that the second official day of winter was far more pleasant than the last few days of fall. Ice still lined the streets of his neighborhood, but he decided to take a drive, anyway. He needed to secure a Christmas present to for his wife.

"Drive carefully while you're out there looking for my Christmas present," Maliah said, as Tarik buttoned his coat and headed for the front door.

"I thought I told you I was too poor to buy you anything this year," he said, a sly grin plastered on his face.

She laughed. "Yeah, right. You'd better be getting me a present."

Tarik didn't break ten miles per hour as he rode the icy ramps that led to the main road, keeping his foot near the brake the entire time. It took several minutes just to travel a few blocks. Road conditions improved once he reached the main street, which had actually been

plowed. He reached Eastpoint Mall in twenty minutes. Once inside the mall, he used his Kay credit card to purchase a fancy white gold and diamond pendant. He asked the saleswoman to hold it until Christmas Eve, not wanting to take the chance of Maliah finding it early. Previous experience taught him that he was terrible at hiding presents in the house.

Tarik was filled with gratitude about his purchase of the pendant as he drove home. He and his wife had no money to buy gifts for friends or relatives. Last Christmas, they scrounged together some money to buy a bunch of small gifts despite their employment struggles. Last year at Christmas, they still hoped that he would find work as a software engineer and she as a therapist during such a depressed economy. Last year, they both thought that their respective master's degrees and work records meant that sooner or later, someone would hire them in their field. At the time, they hadn't accepted that their ethnic names might very well cripple their efforts with prospective employers whose desks were now inundated with qualified (and desperate) applicants.

This year, they both believed that their unfortunate circumstances were not likely to change anytime soon. This year, they expected everyone in their world to understand that what little money they had was too precious to spend on gifts.

Tarik executed a slow and careful right turn onto his block. He was within 50 yards of his house when he noticed that a car parked in the spot he vacated earlier.

Fair game, he thought. He didn't think that it was fair that so many other potential parking spots were cordoned off by furniture.

He braked to a complete stop next to one such space, thinking briefly of moving the obstacles before deciding that he didn't want to risk a keyed car or broken window. He lived in that kind of neighborhood, a neighborhood he and Maliah had no intention of staying in for long when they bought their "starter" house. Tarik was now starting to wonder just how long they could continue paying the mortgage in that starter home. He now worried about being reduced to renting a roach infested room in some disgusting tenement or maybe taking refuge in a friend or relative's basement.

Tarik parked across the alley, where the rear of the neighboring street faced their street. He traipsed carefully back to his house, not wanting to slip on any black ice that lay in ambush on the sidewalk.

Maliah was seated on the couch, tapping the keys of the laptop and watching Food Network when he came in.

"I had to park all the way across the alley because somebody took the space out front," he said. "I saw five or six spots I could've had if not for the damned chairs."

"Yeah, that's bullshit," she said. "People around here are getting out of hand. I wonder if they do that stuff in White neighborhoods."

"I think people in most White neighborhoods have driveways," he said, hanging his coat in the closet near the front door.

"Really?" Maliah said. "Well, I guess we'll just have to try our best to move into a White neighborhood someday, or at least a Black neighborhood where driveways are common."

Tarik laughed, walking over to kiss his wife on the cheek. "I'm not sure if such a neighborhood exists."

He was nursing a beer an hour or so later (trying to convince himself that he still enjoyed the taste) when Maliah announced that she was going to purchase a few groceries.

"Oh, good," she said, peering out of a living room window. "The person who was in our spot left." Tarik's eyes nearly fled their sockets when she carried a folding chair to the front door.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"What does it look like?" The tone of her voice informed him that she did not appreciate being questioned. "I figure if everyone else is doing it, we might as well hold a spot for ourselves. Why should we have to park all the way on the next block and risk busting our asses walking back to the house? We deserve to reserve a spot just as well as anyone else."

Tarik stood up. "You know that's not right, Liah. I thought we both agreed that putting chairs out was wrong."

"I do agree that it's wrong," she said, her brow furrowed. "But, I also think it's stupid to be the only ones suffering because we're so stuck on doing the right thing. It's not like we're talking about a real

moral issue here, like whether or not we should shoplift. No one's going to be hurt by me putting this chair out."

"It is a real moral issue to me!" Tarik said, slapping one palm with the other. "We're not supposed to do something just because everyone else does it."

Maliah's lips parted into a bemused smile. "Wow, honey. You're putting way too much thought into this. Poor baby, you need something else to occupy your mind. Maybe you could try some online job applications while I'm gone."

Tarik snorted. "Yeah. Maybe the thousandth time will be a charm."

"Whatever." She sat the chair down and kissed him on the lips. "I'm sorry to offend your sense of right and wrong, but I'm not walking a long way on this slick street with grocery bags. I'll see you later, Mr. Moral Majority." She chuckled. "Mister Guardian of the Chairs."

IV.

Tarik found himself wishing he had accompanied his wife within minutes of her leaving. That way he wouldn't be alone with his miserable thoughts. Maliah was the only person he unburdened himself to when such thoughts took hold. Friends and family just couldn't

understand. Friends and family hadn't fallen among the ranks of the hopelessly unemployed, so friends and family only ever suggested how he might find a job. The naïve, securely employed fools possessed only an abstract image of how hard it was to find gainful employment in this bleak economy.

Tarik tried to banish his dark thoughts with grateful platitudes that he knew were true. There was no disputing that he was in good physical health, always ate well, and had a place of his own to lay his head at night. He tried to count his blessings, but the vast shadow of his misfortune easily eclipsed what light they cast. An invisible thief had robbed him of his belief that things always work out well for those who do the right thing. Said thief had left no recourse for recompense.

It was just past noon, but that didn't stop Tarik from removing a shot glass from the kitchen cabinet. At least it's not a high ball glass, he reasoned.

He didn't mix the rum that he poured, figuring that the harsh taste of its undiluted form would keep him from downing it too quickly. Tarik soon discovered that he had no problem sucking down something nasty in exchange for a quick buzz.

Maliah arrived home early that evening to find her husband bundled up in a blanket on the couch, watching Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon debate sports on "Pardon the Interruption". She hung her coat and took her bags into the dining room before sitting beside him.

"Started early, today-did we?" She pointed to the shot glass and noticeably depleted bottle of rum that sat on the end table before them.

"Why not?" Tarik slurred.

"Yeah." Maliah smiled ruefully, kissing him on the cheek before going to get her own glass. "Why not?"

V.

Husband and wife followed their drunken evening with plenty more drinking as Christmas Day approached. A haze of depressed slumber, dispassionate errands, and forced conversation with immediate family joined the booze in spiring them along to the big day. They both dashed off holiday emails to the friends they had grown distant from, finding that action to be far easier to stomach than having actual conversations.

Warmer temperatures caused much of the curbside snow to melt by the holiday. The streets of the couple's neighborhood were slick with slush and stubborn ice transforming into slush.

"I don't think you should put that chair out," Tarik said, standing by the driver's side door as Maliah stood near the trunk, set to do just that. "It's not even that bad out here anymore."

Maliah frowned. "Look around, honey. Everyone else is still doing it." Tarik saw that each parking that didn't hold a car was occupied by either one or two lawn chairs.

"So, we're supposed to do what everybody else does?" Tarik spoke rapidly. "I thought we both agreed that it's not right to do that, babe."

Maliah unfolded the chair. "We did." She smiled. "I mean, we do. But, I think it's even less right for us to end up having to walk a block or more to our house with black ice still out here because we're the only ones concerned with doing the right thing. I mean, what's our potential reward? Falling and busting our asses?"

Tarik shook his head. "You do what you want. I can't stop you, anyway."

The argument died during the car ride to his grandmother's senior apartment complex. A feeling that resembled happiness settled over Tarik as they entered a small, overheated space that was crowded with relatives.

They spent three hours there, more time than Tarik had spent around family in six months. Tarik's sisters were there, along with his young nieces and nephew, his aunts, his aunts' current boyfriends, and his younger cousins. Tarik's mother and grandmother chided both he and his wife for being strangers.

"What would y'all have us do?" Tarik said, trying to defend their absence. "Bore you with our hard luck stories?"

Tarik's grandmother laughed and squeezed his cheek as if he were still a small child. "Everyone has hard times, Tarik. They might not all be the same kind, but we all have them. No need to turn into a hermit."

Tarik nodded, choking back the belief that his hard times were different because he had done everything within his power to prevent them. He couldn't verbalize such sentiment without being offensive because a high percentage of his assembled relatives had done the polar opposite.

Tarik contented himself with small talk, eating the variety of food that was offered, and half-watching the Lakers lose to the Cavs on the living room T.V. The food was quite good, so good that he would have enjoyed it if he could remember what enjoyment was. He even packed a take home plate, relishing the opportunity to almost enjoy some leftovers.

He performed the required kisses and hugs as he and Maliah exited, promising everyone that he would stop being such a stranger. He had no intention of keeping that promise.

VI.

Heavy rain poured from the sky as Tarik began the short drive from his grandmother's residence to Maliah's parent's place in Rosedale. This time, it was left to Maliah to defend their scarceness with family.

They ate. They talked. They lingered for a few hours. They packed some leftovers. Malia took her turn at making an empty promise to visit more often as they said their goodbyes.

The sky was black, save for a few stars, and the rain had grown even heavier as they headed home. As they approached, Tarik was surprised

to find the space that Maliah had left a chair in now occupied by another car. Maliah was both surprised and angry.

"No, they didn't," she said. "No somebody didn't move our chair!"

"It's okay, baby," Tarik said, keeping his foot on the brake. "We'll just park up there." He indicated the stretches of curb across the alley where he had parked after coming home from the mall on Tuesday.

"I don't want to walk a whole block because some fool moved our chair!" Maliah howled. "Where is it, anyway?" She jumped out of the car and hustled over to the usurping vehicle, nearly slipping as she did so.

"Oh, Jesus," Tarik grumbled, shifting the car into park and turning on the hazard lights before joining her.

"Here it is," she said, picking up the mangled chair. Her eyes glinted with something Tarik recognized as trouble. "The bastard actually ran over our chair and left it by the curb. I don't believe this!"

"Calm down, babe," Tarik said, knowing that telling her this was guaranteed to produce the opposite effect.

"Don't tell me to calm down," Maliah growled, wheeling toward him. "I should bash this person's hood in with this chair."

"We're not those kind of people, Liah."

Maliah laughed, gently setting the chair down. "Of course, we're not those kind of people, silly. I said I should. I didn't say I would."

Tarik exhaled and chuckled. "I don't know, girl. Sometimes I think you're on your way to the funny farm."

Maliah laughed again. "If I do, you're coming with me."

"Damn right, I will." Tarik took her into his arms. "I'll go anywhere with you. Except to the gynecologist."

Maliah pecked her husband on the lips. "Wouldn't want you there. Come on. Let's go park this car."

"I'll do it," Tarik said. "You're already near the house. No sense of us both having to walk on this slippery stuff."

Maliah punched him in the arm. "Don't insult me like that, husband. You know how we roll! If you're going to risk busting your ass on a patch of black ice, I'm going to risk busting my ass on a patch of black ice."

They exited the car at the end of the block that lay beyond the alley. Maliah held a plastic bag full of leftovers in her left hand while

hooking her free arm in her husband's opposite arm. They stepped carefully as they headed home, hoping for the best, hoping not to fall.