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A little girl named Ellipsis Marks was headed home from church when she got hit by a Nigger. She was nine.

It was 12:01 when it happened. By 12:02, the breaking news broke the Internet as graphic images from the scene of the vernacular homicide went viral: Black girl in her Sunday Best. Left in the street, slain in the crosswalk. Deleted in broad daylight by that runaway inflammatory slur.

And the word was still at large.

When I got the urgent text from the Communications Department I was still in bed, my wife lying next to me, resting up for the big retirement ahead of us, before our one-way flight tomorrow to Noman Island, a syntax-free zone, where she could swim naked in streams of consciousness while I soaked up the sun of our golden years, the long-awaited punctuation after a winding, run-on sentence of a career.

But I wasn't retired yet. This was my last official day as Public Censor.

My wife Anaphora told me not to take the case. My wife Anaphora told me to let the new P.C. find the missing slur. But I couldn't just skip town knowing the N-word was still out there. Never in all my twenty-five years on this job had I left a mystery unsolved. So I told Ana to pack up and I put on my articles, then definitely walked out the door for the last assignment.

The fog index was hovering around 7.89. It took extra time to drive around the Public Sphere to get to my office. As crowds charged the streets in protest to the killing, I had to go the long way to avoid any accident. The detour threw off my plan to go settle up my Dialectic phone bill this morning. But the traffic was a

mess everywhere. Grammar police officers blew whistles in the intersections and redirected the lines with their red PENs (Phonetic Enforcement Nightsticks).

While waiting at a traffic light, I quickly opened my pill bottle, popped two blue morpheme tablets, a.k.a. chill pills. Not exactly prescribed, but the fix helped me stay focused, productive. Which I need at fifty-two or else I'm bound to break apart.

Ten minutes later, I pulled into the garage, parked and went inside the office, my second home. Streamers still hung from crumbling ceiling tiles, remnants of the retirement party the council threw me yesterday. Wasn't expect anything elaborate. This city's still in recovery mode from the recent regression. But they all pitched in, got me a personalized engraved gold plaque and everything, a perfect pangram to commemorate my perfect record that said:

PC: JFK GOT MY VHS AND XLR WEB QUIZ.

This is the type of nonsense gifts I get. Because I'm the P.C. and handle letters for a living, people take me for a word-game-gift guy. They don't ask. They just assume, which speaks more about them than me. What do I look like plastering my bedroom with crossword puzzle wallpaper? But it is what it is. Like with all the previous so-called presents, I found the perfect place for my perfect pangram plaque: In the trash compactor.

Today, hardly anybody was in the building, as was usually the case on Sundays. But I heard Commissioner Copula in the rec room. Frank C. Copula's been my direct superior and the liaison between me and the five-member council. He's a husky one, white guy with see-through skin and a shoulda-coulda comb-over. And he was scarfing down a piece of my leftover cake.

Next to him was a young buck, twenty-five, black kid with a fade and a trimmed goatee. He was making short work of some serial. I knew the boy. Took him on a few ride-alongs last month. Name's Ed. For reasons I can't fathom, he got selected by the council to take over once I'm gone.

- You eating up my cake, commish?
- Your cake? Interesting choice of words, considering I'm the one who gave it to you.

I tore a piece off, dropped it in my mouth.

- How about you give me a lead.
- A lead? That's a good one. Nobody's talking, Saul, you know that. But I wanted Ed to ride shotgun with you, this being your last go and all.

I went to the water cooler, filled a cup and downed the water to hide my distaste. Not that I had a problem with the young buck because he was taking over my job. Or because he was a Semantic. Or because he asked too many arbitrary questions. I just didn't care for a shadow on my last assignment, especially when said shadow reminded me of my son. I kept my eyes on Copula.

- What's the play?
- I got people scanning phone records, interrogating witnesses, back-channeling and so forth. You and Ed, don't worry about the culprit. I want you directly on the object. As you know, this is the critical period. I'd estimate we've got, say, twenty-two hours before the Nigger goes under. We don't want that.

I filled another cup.

- No we do not.
- Listen, Stickman, I know you and this...this word have a history and I—
- Worried I might flip on my last day, huh Commissioner?
- So to speak. All I'm saying is this department can't afford another scandal. Not after Billings.

I gulped down the water, tossed the cup in the bin.

- I'm coming back for my cake.

Then I walked out. Ed followed me.

We were on the road maybe five minutes, flying through the business district, when Ed shot the first of what I knew would be an endless round in a long day of questions.

- Who is Billings?
- James Billings is a was. Died before your time.
- James Billings, James Billings. Name sounds familiar. Wait, wasn't he the former P.C.?
- A vocalist to the extreme.
- What'd he do wrong?
- He was born, for starters.

James Billings. Age thirty-six. Mild-mannered, super-proper, polite as an elevator operator. He was one of the first Public Censors. He created the blueprint for the Independents of Declaration. Wasn't a citizen in the city who had a harsh word to say about the man. But that's because the ones who knew the real him couldn't speak a lick.

The Billingsgate scandal left a permanent stain on this city. Three decades later, his name has become a curse in and of itself. We don't talk about it in the Communications Department. We act like it never happened, masking the shame in a collective vow of silence. If we pretend not to see the asterisk, maybe the footnote on our legacy will disappear. That was the idea. I was only nine when the scandal broke. Nevertheless, Billings made a mark I've been working to blot out of the public memory ever since I became P.C.

Ed adjusted the passenger seat.

- Where we going first?
- Where you think we should go?

He rubbed his calloused hands together.

- Victim's family...maybe. See if they had any enemies—
- We're not parsing the perp, remember? Plus, this was a direct spit-and-run. The Nigger came way too fast and the timing was way too right. That's a factitive.
- You ever seen one before? A Nigger, I mean.

I paused, caught off guard. I knew from the few times we spent patrolling that he had a fetish for interrogations. I didn't want to lie, but didn't care to elaborate either.

- Once.

That was all he was getting, but good for him he got the hint. I turned the car due south onto the conjunction. He looked out his window.

- I didn't even know that word was still around.
- Shouldn't be. And the longer it's at large, the greater the damage.
- You really think it's that dangerous? In this day and age?

I looked over at Ed. This kid was, without a doubt, a real caret-top.

- Considering a girl just got killed, I'd say a little bit.
- You said yourself that was an accident.
- Waiting to happen.
- So you don't think a word can change?