

these men were not to be trusted. How could I accept their advice when their personal lives screamed, "I'm lost toooo"? There was too much fatherhood failure around. The disease seemed to be contagious given the epidemic in our neighborhood. These men could watch me spin, but I couldn't let them get close enough to breathe on me.

The ghetto irony: Many of my generation's young spinners have become the twenty- and thirty-something men who can't be trusted. Making children who will grow up to hate them.

Circumstance, suspect choices, and fear have ways of disfiguring urban hopes with surgical precision. A four-ounce bottle of baby formula becomes much heavier than a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor. Having five women becomes easier than having one.

SONJA LIVINGSTON



THE GHETTO GIRLS' GUIDE
TO DATING AND ROMANCE

1. I know how it is. How you turn in the mirror, look here and there for signs of change, look hard for the woman you'll become. Well, look and turn all you want, you won't see it happening—the bends your body will take, the pulling in of, the swelling. You won't see, but they'll inform you. As you walk by, they'll give an "Mm, mmmm, mmm" and "Sure looks fine" and that's when you'll know. Just keep your eyes down. From the time those titties erupt from your chest, point your eyes to the ground and keep on walking. Right on by Lynam's bar, past the fish market on Parsells and Webster where men on break stand outside and call out to girls and women, but mostly girls. Their voices are rainforests at night and you don't mind being called baby all the time. But you must. Forget the smell of them, forget their slippery skin, ignore the slow glow of their cigarettes, the tug of August

heat. Just think of all the fish they've handled and keep walking, eyes down.

2. He says come here sweet thing. He wants to talk and only for a minute. Don't be a fool. There's no such thing as a minute. He'll put his mouth on your neck, slip his hand up your skirt and press small circles into your thighs with the tips of his fingers. He'll say just a minute longer, and though you're smart in every other thing, those fingers will circle their way through your skin and you'll have no choice but to let him move up. And in. A minute becomes an hour, then a lifetime. Just remember to take your watch, since he won't have his and it doesn't matter anyway, because minutes don't exist.

3. He won't be wearing a ring or maybe he will, but can explain it away. One thing's for sure, you can't count on jewelry to tell you anything about a man. If he doesn't take you to his place, he's cheating. If he says he lives with his aunt and her sister and they go to church early in the morning and are all around quiet people so you can't go there late at night, he's lying. If he claims to have two jobs and so can't come around much, and when he does, his wallet's flat, he's lying.

4. Your mother's on the phone with the doctor on call from the Genesee Hospital, trying to get help for the pain in your lower stomach and side. The pain that won't let you sleep. Bits of you pull off and away. The bleeding is heavy. "The doctor wants to know whether you've done it." She tosses the words out like she's asking about the last time you ate, but you know

just what she means and you're scared, with your stomach tearing itself up and her sounding so casual. You'll be inclined to tell the truth, but it's much better to lie. You have no idea how disappointed mothers can be. She'll think you haven't listened to one damned thing she's ever said. Your mother won't say this, she'll just return the phone to its cradle and keep her eyes from resting on you the same way after that night.

5. You smell the perfume, find the gold hoop earring in the back seat of his orange pinto, hear from Maria Maldonado that she saw him at the mall with some other girl while she was there buying white satin baptism shoes for her baby. Don't bother asking. You don't need any evidence, because deep down you already know. If you think he is, he is.

6. When he rubs you up and whispers in your ear just how much he likes girls with a little extra flesh on their asses and says that parts of you are like hills he'd like to climb—remember that he told Wanda just last week that he likes girls with high tight asses and that hers is as high and as tight as a button. He tells you there's nothing like a white girl, then tells Stacy from down the street that mocha's his favorite flavor. And while he was talking up her tiny butt, he told small-assed Wanda that he craves the copper of island girls, said he dreamt her ass was a coin in the palm of his hand. Use your sense. He most prefers the ass nearest to his hand.

7. Stay with your girls when you walk to the store. Your mom wants a loaf of bread or a gallon of milk and you have to get

it. She can't leave and you don't want to go. You may as well be seed thrown to the birds, the way grown men on porches stare you down and call after you every time you walk to and from the store or to and from anywhere (unless you wake up early and beat them out of bed). Get your friends to walk with you. They won't want to, but they'll go because they'll need you later that same day. Two is safer than one and three is even better. Talk to each other about clothes, shoes, makeup—anything but them. Pretend they don't exist, or if you have to, lie to each other about how much you hate them. Do anything you can to keep from falling.

8. You want to so much it hurts. But don't. Don't spend money from your after-school job on gifts. He's grateful, but receiving becomes an easy habit. Don't let him use your name and phone number to buy the big black sofa from rent-a-center. He won't pay and they'll hound your mother, your sister, and everyone with your last name for payment. Don't lend money. He will not give it back. Or he'll give it back once or twice just to show he can, then follow up his payment with a request for more. Then more. He can't help it, his heart is a sponge. You can't help it either—you are different sides of the same cloth. Your heart is liquid—it would fall through your fingers if you ever tried to touch it. It's better to say you have nothing to give, then hide the bags of stuff you buy at Midtown Plaza at your best friend's mother's house, so he doesn't ask how you paid.

9. The one who gives you roses. The one who says your eyes are better than the stained glass at church, that your skin is like milk. He's the one for you. He wants you to meet his mother, his brother, his Titi Eva in from New York. But it feels all wrong so you push him away. He keeps at you, until you can't take it any longer and give him one last slam. He sees something you don't see and to be wanted like that is a spice you've never tasted. So you spit him out and long for something regular, some taste you recognize. He cries and writes long sad letters. You fold your arms over your chest and laugh. Crow of a girl. You'll never have him, but he's the one for you.

10. He will not take care of you. Even if he wants to, even if he cries in your ear and looks into your eyes while you fuck. He's good deep down, but then so is everyone. He'll walk to your job and meet you there for three days straight, though you look away and pretend to be alone. Though he's five or maybe ten years older and you tell him not to, he's there after work, grabbing at your hand. These are his lies: *She doesn't mean anything. You can drop out of school, quit this job. I'll take care of you.* Listen closely. This is the prettiest of poisons. He's talking crazy, and if you believe him, you're living in la-la land. To be taken care of is not an option. It is for girls on TV and people inside borrowed library books. But for you, it's not an option. It never was.

11. Fool of a girl. You believe he'll meet you on the corner at eleven like he said. Though he did not show last night and was

an hour late the night before, you rub oil onto your legs, push yourself into your new white sweater, and wait. He won't show, and even if he does, he'll do nothing but stain up your sweater—but hope is worse than a pebble in the shoe, so you wait and watch, make up counting games with passing cars, and an hour later, walk back home and fold the sweater away for some other night.

12. Avoid boys with warm hands on Halloween night. They smell like falling leaves and overripe cologne and even though they can't dance, one touch on your arm and they melt you. They push you against the fence and groan their way into your long white gown and it's so cold, you don't mind the fog of their breath, the pink of their fingers. The party's over, your friends have all gone home, and his mouth is wet and hard and knows you better than you do. You've been an Egyptian princess all night, snake coiled on your arm, eyes lined in black. Now you're caught between him and a chain-link fence and there's nowhere to go but down.

13. When his woman calls and tells you stay the hell away from her man, you should. You'll be tempted not to—she sounds so broken and he'll explain about how crazy she is, how she won't let go, has their child spy on him during visits, found your number and is making up lies. She'll tell you how it really is. But you won't believe something as ragged as her voice could ever touch those big green eyes or the mouth whose inside tastes of warm beer and coconut. You won't lis-

ten, but when his woman calls and tells you to stay the hell away, you should.

14. Run in place. Do jumping jacks. Jog around the park at the end of the street five times. Then five times more. Your period's late and there's only one thing to do. Walk and pray. Jog and pray. Squish your body into sit-ups, push-ups, knee bends. Pray. You hardly believe in God, but this is not the time for questioning. Just pray. When it finally comes, you are happy and grateful and fresh and clean. You help your mother scrub the walls and gather lilacs into jelly jar vases. You'll never take that risk again. Ever.

Until the next time he calls.

15. The health teacher, the parish priest, the public service announcement don't mean to suggest that nothing good can come from you. They don't mean to talk like you're some Humane Society stray. It's just that they know things. Pregnancy equals failure. You see it too. The way your friends drop off one at a time. They let someone into their pants, their bellies swell, then they fade into the gray. They might go to the Young Mothers' Program for a month or two, until the baby comes. Then it's as if they never existed. So be strong, say the health teacher, the priest, the message on TV. Keep your legs safely fastened, or if you absolutely must, be sure to roll the latex on like so. It's the truth and you know it, so don't think so much. Don't be so sensitive. They don't mean to imply that there's something wrong with having more around like you.