

MARGARET WILKERSON SEXTON

# White Girl

**S**AY, WHITE GIRL,” Liana could hear the brown-skinned girl behind her whispering in the middle of Pre-algebra. She knew she was calling for her, even though Liana wasn’t white. At the old school, everybody knew Liana’s daddy was Creole, that her mother was light-skinned black. Also, at her old school, there had been other girls like her, girls whose hair touched their butts and swung back and forth when they jumped rope. But when her daddy moved out, her mama had to transfer her to Eleanor McMain Magnet, and she was the lightest girl here by a long shot.

They talked really different at this school too. Like for instance, “Say, White Girl,” which the girl whispered again, and which Liana could understand, but some of their other sayings went right over her head. The other day one of them had told her she had “beaucoup barrettes” in her head, and Liana thought the girl meant her scrunchies were ugly, then she asked her friend Erika’s older sister, and she said it just meant she had too many in. The next day she used only one. She didn’t mean to, she wasn’t the type to follow other people’s lead, but this school was calling something different out of her and she had the feeling she should just comply.

The bell rang and she hurried out of class. The girl who had been calling for her was right on her heels.

“Say, White Girl,” she whispered again. She smelled funny, but in a good way, like a mix of pink hair oil and watermelon Jolly Ranchers.

“Yeah?” Liana turned around. If it had been her old school, she might have said something like, “What? Stop calling me. And just so you know, I’m not white.”

“Where was you at yesterday? You wasn’t in class.”

“My grandfather died,” she said.

“Oh I’m sorry to hear that.” The girl had finger waves on top of her head and a gold necklace around her neck that spelled out Mahogany. She wore skorts and a striped polo shirt. That seemed to be the uniform here, but Liana hadn’t had any warning. At her old school they wore actual uniforms—plaid blue-and-green skirts and light blue collared shirts—so she’d just worn her weekend clothes—jeans and a Looney

Tunes T-shirt—the first few days, even though they were completely out of place.

“It’s all right, he was old. I wasn’t close to him anyway,” Liana said.

The girl shook her head like she was in mourning herself. “Still,” she said, “death is deep,” and she was quiet for a while. Then, “Where you fixin’ to go?”

Liana scrunched up her face. She was glad to have someone to talk to. She had been by herself the last few days and had even eaten her lunch in the language lab alone. Still, interpreting these kids’ slang was hard work.

She decided to just be honest.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, girl.”

“Where you from?”

“Here in New Orleans.”

The girl looked back at her in disbelief.

“Where in New Orleans?”

“The East.”

“For true?”

“Umhmm,” Liana nodded.

“What school was you at before here though?”

“Resurrection of Our Lord.”

“Ohh, okay,” she nodded. “With the other white girls.”

“I’m not white, you know,” Liana felt comfortable saying now. “I know I look it, but I’m as black as you are.”

“Don’t you be calling me black,” the girl rolled her fingers through the back of her head. “My grandmother is Indian and my father’s grandfather was white. That’s where I get this good hair from.”

She paused and studied Liana like she was looking for her to be impressed.

“Anyway, you got lunch this period?” she asked.

Liana nodded.

“Well, come eat with me. My name is Mahogany. You can sit at my table.”

The lunchroom was five times the size of Liana’s old one, but Mahogany seemed to know everyone in it. Most of the school was black, but there were all different kinds of people: football players, nerds, weird artsy kids who still had a lot of friends, and Mahogany either gave dap to, hugged, or nodded at them all. Finally she stopped at a table of girls, and Liana took them in. She didn’t know how to categorize them. They were like Mahogany but girlier. Most of them were wearing a full face of

makeup. Liana did that on special occasions, like when her daddy took her to his office's daddy-daughter dance, but that was two years ago. She had asked him if he was having another one this year, and he had said it wasn't going to work out.

"This here is White Girl," Mahogany said.

Liana was so happy to have somewhere to sit she didn't bother to correct her.

"But she ain't really white," Mahogany said.

"You could tell she ain't white," one of the girls said. "You thought she was white with all them naps in her kitchen?"

Liana didn't know whether to feel offended or complimented.

Mahogany introduced the other girls. One of them went to Liana's church, and they smiled over that, but that was where the connection ended. The table spent the rest of the hour belting out SWV songs, gossiping and gushing over boys. Liana didn't listen to that kind of music, she didn't know the girls they were making fun of, and she had never had a boyfriend. She told herself it didn't matter; she was lucky to have friends. When lunch was over, she followed them back to their lockers and watched them hug before separating. Liana was walking away when she heard Mahogany call her name.

"Say, White Girl," she said. "Meet me here after class and we can walk to the bus together."

"HOW WAS IT TODAY?" Liana's mama asked her that night at dinner. She had made a pan of macaroni and cheese to feed the out-of-town guests staying at her grandmother's, but Liana wouldn't touch it. She couldn't; it was funeral food.

"It was good." She told her about the girl she'd met, and how she'd introduced her to all her friends. Her mama had been most worried about her finding people in a new place so Liana expected her to be excited for her. But she barely looked up.

"That's good, baby. You're not hungry though?" Liana shook her head. She didn't know how to tell her mother she had had an appetite before she'd walked through that door, but it was like you could smell the grief in the house, and that put her off even her favorite foods.

Her mother sighed. "I know you and your Paw Paw were close," she said. "He always said you were his favorite grandchild."

Liana shrugged. They were close, especially after her daddy left, and before he died, she'd loved to hear him brag on their bond. But in the

last few days, hearing how much he loved her had only made her sadder. “His only grandchild,” she said to take the edge off her feeling.

“What about Octavia?”

“What about her?” Liana asked, crumpling her napkin in her fist. Octavia was her only cousin, three years younger, and when they were small they wore the same clothes, slept in the same bed, whispered to each other long past midnight. People called Octavia Liana’s shadow, and they called the two of them together twins. Of course they weren’t really twins though: Octavia was as dark as Liana was light, and Octavia’s daddy, Uncle Paul, would sing Stevie Wonder’s “Ebony and Ivory” every time they walked through the door.

Then Liana’s daddy had left, and she began to notice Octavia’s was still there. Not only still there but over the top with it: bragging on her looks—*not a day goes by that someone doesn’t stop Octavia on the street to ask if she’s that little girl from the Cosby show*—her grades, how much her fancy tuition cost. Liana knew the showboating got on her mama’s nerves, but it did more than that to her. It made her feel like whatever it was that caused Octavia’s daddy to stick around had missed her somehow, that she would never be able to find it, because she didn’t even know what to look for. Since then, she’d been testing the waters with Octavia. They hung out last time the girl came to visit, but Liana made her sit alone on the sofa three hours before she went out to say hello. When it was time to say goodbye, she acted like she wouldn’t miss her. “Now don’t go crying like a baby,” she said. “I’ll see you soon enough.”

Now to her mother, she took on the same tone. “Octavia who?” she said. “She ain’t never here anyway.”

THE NEXT DAY Liana decided to do her hair a little differently. Her friend Shanice down the street had a mother who owned a beauty parlor, so Liana begged her to come over early to add some finger waves to her front.

“What do you need finger waves for? You already have good hair,” Shanice said.

Liana shrugged. “It’s cute. Plus that’s how everybody’s wearing it.”

“Everybody who?” Shanice asked, running her pink fingernails through her flowing locks. She was still at Resurrection of Our Lord and had no idea what was in style. But she gelled them in anyway, and Liana’s new friends couldn’t keep their hands out of her scalp.

Liana didn’t stop at her hair either. She asked her mama to take her to the Plaza that weekend. Her mother fussed at first, complaining about

how much she had to get done before the funeral, but she finally gave in and Liana found some short shorts and skirts on sale at Macy's that looked close enough to what Mahogany wore every day. She started talking different too, sprinkling *aunts* here and there, playing around with conjugation. On the way back from the mall, her mama turned to her and pointed her finger in her face.

"Now, don't you talk like that around me, like you one of those li'l girls from the projects."

"Okay, Mama, God," Liana had said, pretending to be annoyed, but she smiled too, and she kept smiling all the rest of the way home.

She still didn't really know Mahogany and her friends that well, not like she knew her old friends at Resurrection of Our Lord or the ones down the block. Shanice, for instance, dressed in suits at the age of thirteen, wanted to be Whitney Houston when she grew up, and practiced smiling for pictures in the mirror thirty minutes a day. "If you stay ready, you don't have to get ready," she'd say.

Then there was Erika, who you had to be careful around 'cause she could dish it but couldn't take it. She had a smart mouth, so she'd have you thinking you could rib her same as she ribbed you but then she'd turn around and burst into tears and you'd have to say sorry a million times before you could get the day back together again.

So, no, she didn't know the girls as well. She had learned a ton about the boys each of them liked 'cause that was all they talked about, but she told herself it had only been a week. She would figure them out, and they would figure her out too.

One day, Mahogany turned to her at the bus stop.

"What if we didn't take the bus today?" she asked out the blue.

"You want to walk home?"

"No, I'm not saying that. I'm saying I got a friend that stay by the basketball courts. I call him my friend, but he more than that, you know what I mean?"

"Sure," Liana said, though she wasn't exactly certain she did.

"Anyway, my sister got her license, and sometimes she drop me off by his house, but he stay by school so I was thinking I could just walk and see him today."

"What that gotta do with me?" Liana asked. She beamed inside, noting her word choice. Sometimes it came out funky, but this time was perfect, she thought. She could imagine Mahogany saying something like that herself.

"Well, my friend got another friend who looking for a girl. He asked me to bring the prettiest friend I had. And I knew off the bat it would be you."

"For real?" Liana asked, though when she thought about it people out here said *for true* when they were questioning something.

"Of course. You got the best hair in school plus you red and your butt real big. Anyway, you in?"

"Yeah, I guess so," Liana said without thinking. She was still paying too much attention to the compliment. The way she looked had been a problem for her her whole life. She knew she wasn't ugly, she couldn't go anywhere without people saying the opposite, but except for when her mama would stare in her eyes and pinch the tip of her sharp nose, her looks seemed to always get in her way.

Mahogany had said they would meet her friend at the 7-Eleven closest to school, but Liana started to have second thoughts by the second mile.

"How long did you say this walk was?" she asked.

"Don't worry, we almost there. And believe me, he know I don't like to wait, so he gon' be there."

They walked for fifteen more minutes before Liana saw the store's bright sign. She looked around. She had never been in a neighborhood like this without her mama, and in fact if her mama was here, she'd roll her windows up, lock her car doors, and say, *Stay with me, Lord.*

"There he is," Mahogany said. She pulled her shorts from between her legs and put on more lip gloss. As Liana got closer, she could see the boys were cute. One of them was chocolate and tall with a low-cut fade, and the other was red with light eyes and wavy hair. She preferred the dark one but she saw from the way Mahogany hugged him that he was hers. That was okay, she was going to ask to leave in an hour anyway. The boys lived a few blocks from the 7-Eleven so they had to walk some more to get to their house. The red boy slowed down so Mahogany and Chocolate could walk ahead. Every now and then Red would stir up some dirt with his shoe, but other than that they walked in silence. Then as they came up to the subdivision, like knowing their destination was around the corner gave him strength, he turned to her and started asking questions.

"What's your favorite song on the radio?" She had to ask him to repeat himself, he talked so softly, but then when he did, she had her response ready.

"Jodeci, 'Forever my Lady.'"

"Mine too," he said. "You want to know something funny?" he asked. "People at school call me Devante."

“What school do you go to?”

“St. Leo the Great.”

“Really?” She slipped up and said it the way she normally would have. That was a Catholic school just like her old one; she was surprised she hadn’t seen him before. “I went to Resurrection of Our Lord,” she said.

He smiled like he was seeing her for the first time. “That’s what’s up.” He slowed down as they turned onto the street she thought must be his. She was surprised to see the houses were mostly like hers, small brick with colored shutters around the windows, but the paint was peeling here, and the lawns were overgrown.

He stopped in front of a house. “Is this where you stay?” she asked.

Red nodded, and they went inside. The house could have been any of the ones on her block, with a TV in the front room and shelves and shelves of family pictures. A painting of the Last Supper and a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., hung on the wall above the sofa. The boys turned on music videos and offered the girls Kool-Aid. At first they talked among the four of them, but then their conversations drifted off in different directions. Liana ear-hustled that Mahogany and Chocolate had a friend in common who might be pregnant, but soon she started paying attention to her own friend. He’d been playing football since he was old enough to walk, he said. It was like air to him.

“You play sports?” he asked.

“I played softball at my old school,” she said. “Went to nationals and everything.”

“Really?” he asked. “What position?”

“Pitcher.”

“What?” He lifted her arm and examined it. “Yeah I could see that,” he said. Even after he finished looking at it, he still held on to it, and after a while, he moved closer to her and she leaned her head on his shoulder.

Liana wasn’t so caught up she forgot about her curfew, but she was close. Mahogany and Chocolate had started kissing though, and she had to clear her throat three times before she got their attention.

The boys walked them all the way back to school where Mahogany’s sister was waiting for her in an old maroon Camry, and as soon as they got in the car, Mahogany started going on about her friend.

“Just as chocolate as a Tootsie Roll, and boy would I like to suck that—” she trailed off laughing. “Nah, lemme stop.”

“Girl, you nasty,” her sister said, but she was smiling at them from the rear-view mirror.

Liana just listened, not really listening, thinking about her own friend, how he had picked up her arm, how he seemed so interested in what she had to say, how just before they separated, he'd asked for her number so softly she had to ask him to repeat himself. She thought maybe he was nervous she wouldn't give it to him. Before they'd hugged goodbye she had to ask him for his name.

"Tory," he'd said, looking up at her. And she'd told him that she was Liana.

THE FUNERAL was the next day, and it was sad to see her mama cry, but it didn't touch her in her gut the way she was afraid it would have. Of course her mama had been right; she was his favorite grandchild. She had met up with him once a week for the last three years to help him with his garden, and it had been hard not to love a man who spent so much time tending to dirt. Even still, when she walked up to the casket and stared into it she felt like she was looking at a different person altogether, not only because they'd put makeup on him and slicked his hair back, but because the part of her that had slipped her hand in his and called him PawPaw seemed irretrievably far off. Her father had said he would meet her at the wake, and normally she would have believed him, but by the eulogy she stopped looking back for his face. And even sitting next to Octavia, who sat on her own father's lap, boohooing onto his suit jacket, didn't eat at her one bit.

Tory called that night like she knew he would, and he said he and Chocolate were throwing a party that Friday. Did she wanna go? Of course she did. She ran to Mahogany's locker first thing Monday morning and they shrieked and talked over each other about what they were going to wear. The other girls walked so far behind them, it seemed like they weren't all together, and Liana felt like she had finally made a real friend.

THEY MET at Mahogany's apartment Friday afternoon to get ready. Liana let Mahogany do her makeup and it felt like too much, but Mahogany assured her she looked like Mariah Carey. Liana had brought her own clothes over, overalls over a tank top with a flannel in case it got cool, but when she saw Mahogany was wearing a body suit dress, she took her up on her offer to borrow something of hers. She had brought her own shoes, pumps with a two-inch heel, and even though Mahogany's were taller she still felt good looking in the full-length mirror, like an alternate version of herself. She didn't feel white, she didn't care that she wasn't black, she just felt sexy.

This time Mahogany's sister drove them all the way to the subdivision. They could hear the party before they saw it, Biggie Smalls's "One More Chance" blaring from a radio in Tory's house.

*Don't leave your girl around me*

*True player for real ask Puff Daddy*

The door was open so they just walked in. Liana had been expecting a *party* party but there were only about eight people there. She could see Tory from where she stood. He was sitting on his sofa with Chocolate, but two other girls were there too. The girls were dressed the way she'd intended to, in overalls and flannels, and they stopped talking as Liana and Mahogany walked up.

"Hey, you." Tory jumped up and hugged her. He led her back to the sofa and positioned her on his lap. The girls whispered something to each other, then moved over to the other couch.

"Don't worry about them," Tory said. "They jealous of how fine you look. Damn, girl." He whistled and Liana put her head down to hide her blush.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Whatever you're having." He passed her a Coke and she leaned into him. Over the last few days she'd practiced conversations they could have, but she was drawing a blank now. She hadn't been so nervous the last time she'd been there. It was something about those girls on the other couch and the way she was dressed. In the last few days she had been thinking about him and hadn't had the sense to hide it.

"How was your day?" she asked.

"Okay," he said. "We won."

"Congratulations." She patted him on the chest. She felt like a silly cheerleader but maybe that was okay. She could see the girls staring at her out of the corner of her eye.

"I dedicated it to you," he said. Then she heard the girls laughing. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but she knew it was about her. She looked at Tory, hoping he didn't hear them too.

"Should we go for a walk?" she asked, but before he could answer, one of the girls stood up.

"Say, Tory, why you brought that white girl to this neighborhood?"

Liana didn't have the nerve to look at Tory, to see the shame that would spread over his face. She just stared down at her feet, the two-inch heels that seemed ridiculous now.

"She ain't white," Mahogany said, walking over to the girl. Liana had

forgotten she was even there. “And why you care if she is?”

The other girl stood up to face Mahogany then, two against one, but Liana couldn’t budge. Someone had turned the music down and in the silence she tried to say something, anything, to stick up for herself; nothing came. Tory had been holding her hand, but he dropped it and walked over to Mahogany.

“Yeah, why you care what she is anyway?” he shouted. She hadn’t known he was capable of talking so loud. It occurred to her that he was standing up for her, but it only made her feel tragic.

Another guy walked from the TV to the couch and stood next to the two girls.

“What you in my girl’s face for?” he shouted at Tory. A couple more guys followed that one, yelled some more, then one socked Tory in his face.

“No!” Liana screamed before contact was made, but too late for anything to be done about it.

Mahogany ran toward her and grabbed her hand. “Come on, girl,” she screamed. “Take those pumps off.” She pulled Liana behind her. Liana turned back for Tory, but it was too late. He had pushed the boy back and they were both rolling around on the floor. Mahogany pulled at her arm again, harder this time, and Liana yanked off her shoes, shoved them under her armpit, and ran with Mahogany all the way to the 7-Eleven. They stopped when they got to the pay phone, and Liana burst into tears.

“They’re going to kill him,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “Did you see the way they punched him?”

“That boy’s gon’ be fine. I’m sure that’s not his first fight and it won’t be his last.” Mahogany paused. “Anyway, that’s kind of sexy, right, a man standing up for your honor? Those stupid bitches. I woulda fought them myself until that dude showed up. I ain’t about to fight no dude. I’m good, but I ain’t that good.”

She called her sister. “She’ll be here in five,” she said slamming the phone down.

But five turned into fifteen that turned into twenty. The whole while they waited, Liana kept hoping Mahogany would say something that would make her feel like she could talk to Tory again, but it never came. When Mahogany did speak, she just reenacted the fight, alternating between relief she hadn’t had to be involved and regret.

They didn’t talk the whole car ride back. When they rounded the corner to Liana’s house, Liana turned to her friend.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered.

"What you sorry for? You weren't the one caused those bitches to act the fool."

Liana shrugged. "If I wasn't there you'd still be with your boo having a good time."

"Girl, please. It's better to have a good story. You know how jealous the girls are gon' be on Monday when we tell 'em what happened? We gon' look like the baddest bitches at school. 'Cause we are," she added and laughed, slapping her thigh.

"Anyway, next week we wearing Tims and jeans and I'm throwing blows if I need to, you hear me?"

Liana stepped out of the car, not bothering to tell her she wasn't going back. Tory wouldn't want her after this, and even if he did, it would only be a matter of time before something along the same lines happened again.

She closed the Camry door. Cars blocked her garage and lined the curb outside her house. She had been looking forward to telling her mama everything, collapsing into her arms, but she'd forgotten about the get-together tonight. Family was still in town for the funeral, and Mama had fixed ribs and potato salad to see them off.

Liana walked inside. Her mama was so surrounded by relatives Liana could only see the back of her head. The same family members who had been crying the other day were drinking beer and smoking Kool Lights now. She kissed some of them and made her way to the kitchen. Her mama spooned cookie dough onto a pan, and Octavia stood under her, licking the bowl. Liana was used to that. Octavia was the baby of the family, and Liana's mama coddled her for it, but tonight was different.

The girl's eyes widened when she saw her. "Liana!" she yelled, and she ran up to hug her.

Liana didn't hug her back. Octavia didn't seem to notice, so Liana's rage just built.

"Liana!" the girl shrieked again, "before you came we made cookies, ginger snaps. Your mom taught me her secret recipe. Then we played Scattergories and I won."

"I've never seen a kid that young play that hard," her mom cut in, smiling.

Liana was barely listening. She was looking at Octavia's father. Uncle Paul sat on the couch all the way across the room, talking to a cousin, but still staring at Octavia. It was like he couldn't help looking at her, her

round eyes, the thick glasses that took up half her chocolate face. And it wasn't just *that* he looked, it was how: his eyes glazed over, grinning like a dope; Liana half expected him to drool. He was so proud just to behold her; it was like she was gold, and he could recognize his own value on account of having created her.

For the first time in a long time, Liana didn't wonder what that said about her. She already knew.

"The card said US President and we had rolled the letter *B*," Octavia went on. "Your mom wrote Bush, but I knew she would write that word, since he's our president now. I thought back and said James Bu—"

"Shut up!" Liana screamed. She wasn't yelling at anyone in particular, but she was looking at Octavia.

"Shut the fuck up, with your ugly black self," she repeated. Then she just stood there with her head down in silence.

She hadn't recognized her own voice. She had never heard it so deep, and those words, she couldn't believe they had even been thoughts in her mind, but they had been, and they were out now.

"What's gotten into you, girl?" Her mother reached out and grabbed her arm, shook it in front of a roomful of people whose eyes were on her.

Liana was so ashamed, so full of sadness, she ran out of the kitchen.

When she got to her bed, she waited for her mother to follow. She didn't know if she would cry in her arms anymore. She just wanted to tell her what had happened that night, all of it, starting from the beginning, but maybe it wouldn't make sense to bring it up now. It wasn't like it was an excuse. One thing wasn't even related to the other.