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CLEAN. FREAKS.

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

CHRISTOPHER JACKSON MORRIS

May 2022

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## ABSTRACT

An excerpt from an experimental literary crime novel interrogating adolescent identity, internalized anti-queerness, mental illness, and white moderatism.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Abundant thanks to Tommy Franklin, my thesis advisor, for his attention and dedication to my writing throughout my three years as an M.F.A. student. Immeasurable thanks also to Kiese Laymon, my second reader and a constant source of inspiration, encouragement, intellectual and personal generosity, and difficult but intensely necessary questions. Thanks to Dr. Leigh Anne Duck, my third committee member. Thanks to Dr. Daniel Stout and Dr. Ari Friedlander, two of the literature faculty whose classes made the most marked impacts on my thinking about writing and about this story in particular. Thanks to the full-time and visiting creative writing fiction faculty—Melissa Ginsburg, Chris Offutt, Matt Bondurant, Maurice Carlos Ruffin, and Raven Leilani—and to the critical and creative writing graduate students who have constituted my community for these last three years. Finally, infinite thanks to my family back home—and especially my parents for supporting one of their kids going down one of the least culturally supported career paths out there.

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CLEAN. FREAKS.

A NOVEL

All of us were very much responsible for what very much actually happened in what was initially and unfunnily called *The Hypothetical Disappearance of Black Oliver Twist*, but by the way we sent her marching across the football field less than two weeks after the fact, all bedazzled in green and gold with the floodlights rebounding off the sweat down her face, you'd have thought the cheering, drum-thumping community of New Watertown, Connecticut had collectively saved Aliyah Davis. That night—which was, to be precise, ten days removed from the attempt that had been made on her life—her white sneakers crunched over the artificial turf. She didn't stray from the straight line she was making for the stage at the center of the field, but she turned her head towards the bleachers and raised her unbroken arm in an all-encompassing wave and smiled without showing her teeth when the crowd roared over the drums and the trumpets sputtering out our high school's anthem. Aliyah reached the stage and limped up the three metal steps with her hand on the banister and then slid that hand liquidly into Principal Mathers's. She waved again to the people crowding the bleachers. A swift summer breeze rearranged her braids. She sat in a stiff metal folding chair to the left of Principal Mathers and the podium. The crowd continued to clap and cheer and “we love you, Ally!” Then she turned to you, Kali, my twin sister, my exact mirror image, sitting in a second metal chair beside hers, and, as we all later learned, said, no longer smiling, “My parents are gonna wait to file until you turn eighteen. They want you tried as an adult.”

“Good evening, New Watertown!” Principal Mathers said, stepping up to the podium. The crowd cheered louder and twirled noisemakers, and he had to repeat the phrase “as you all know” three times before it was quiet enough for him to proceed: “As you all know, New Watertown High is always proud when, at the end of every school year, we have the privilege of honoring our graduating seniors before they go on to serve in the military, join the American workforce, or before they leave home to further their studies and pursue intellectual betterment through higher education.”

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“And while the school year is not yet over,” Mathers said, “we're already looking ahead to congratulating our current class of soon-to-be graduates.”

Aliyah leaned in close to you and said something I couldn't make out from the bleachers, something we ultimately learned was: “Two minutes. And we're gone.”

“But that class will not include one of our town's very best and brightest.” Mathers looked over his shoulder at Aliyah, the floodlights catching in his glasses and turning them the color and consistency of TV static. “As most of you know, Aliyah Davis and her family moved to Greenwich two summers ago. But Ally never stopped being a part of our family. And after a long and traumatic few days, we've been given the chance to heal. To unify around an indefatigable young woman whose inclination towards forgiveness has trumped the pull many of us would have felt towards selfishness and bitterness.”



“Charlene,” Riley said at me, but I was watching the stage and scrubbing my hands up and down my jeggings. I was watching Aliyah watching you.

“In the name,” Mathers said, “of integrity, hope, and healing, I want to welcome back a former Bobcat, a pillar of our school community, and an honorary graduate-to-be of New Watertown High—”

Aliyah made to stand; you gazed out into the crowd and made immediate and direct eye contact with me.

“Ally ‘the Shark’ *Davis!*”

Noisemakers rattled up the rows of bleachers behind us, the sound brittle. Aliyah took that one step between her and the podium while Riley dumped the remains of her burrito into her takeout bag and leaned back against someone’s legs and, when they complained, said, “Then move.”

I was pretty sure Ally hadn’t seen me yet, but it still pricked at me that, if she had, she’d have seen me flat-faced and stilled. No clapping, no cheering, no nothing. With Riley, she’d see the lack of enthusiasm and know it was because Riley wasn’t going to let these people feel good about throwing themselves a parade by throwing her a parade; when it came to me, she’d probably just think I was jealous.

Aliyah stood at the podium and smiled at the audience through their wailing ecstasy. The floodlights were milky across her brow but glittered down the length of her sequined golden blouse. As the noise at last began to subside, she pinched her bottom lip and breathed out. She looked down at the podium. She inhaled through her mouth. She said, “Hello, Bobcats!”

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“So move your goddamn legs,” Riley said to the people behind her. “*Gosh.*”

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“Be quiet,” a girl standing directly behind me said.

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Aliyah looked out at the noise. She saw Riley yelling at this girl. She saw me sitting there and tugging down on the drawstrings of my hoodie once, twice, three times, an older compulsion that had only recently resurfaced but that she’d have remembered from when we were in middle school.

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