The Joshua Tree
The night my grandfather died and my brother lost his right eye, I slept with all the windows open. Spring had come to the Mojave. The air smelled of sagebrush and rain, and tiny gold flowers speckled the dark basalt hills. The desert, for all its austerity, knows how to be grateful. Seeing the first buds of spring, our mother would quote Kahlil Gibran: “The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.” Maybe that’s why she moved us to the middle of the Mojave, two miles off the paved road, between the dunes and the cracked clay of the dry lake. Our mother found beauty in survival.

She let me sleep through the first call. Her father had been sick a long time; his death brought tears but also relief. The second call brought only terror. My brother, Peter Slate, had been assaulted at a nightclub in Los Angeles. He was a large Black man dancing with a young White woman, and a group of skinheads attacked him—at least, that’s how I understood it then. Years later, I found a more complicated story in the police report. My brother left the dance floor to put his beer down on a table. He exchanged words with a man sitting at the table. Both had been drinking, and their argument escalated. The man at the table was White, as was the other man who came from behind and smashed a bottle into my brother’s right eye, pushing glass up toward
his brain. My family saw the attack as a hate crime, but what role did race play that night?

The security guards let the attackers go and grabbed my brother instead. They twisted his arm behind his back and shoved him into an alley. The police found him barely conscious, slumped on the pavement, his shirt soaked in blood. When our mother got the call, the doctors did not know whether he had brain damage. He had lost the eye, but they didn’t tell her that. She had slept one hour after grieving her father, and now she faced losing a son. She woke me by yelling my name.

My brother and I had the same mother, but different fathers. His was from Nigeria. Having a White mother and a White brother complicated his Blackness, but it did not change how he was seen by strangers as he walked down the street—or danced in a club with a White woman. He was Black. I was White, and so were the men who attacked him.

The drive to the hospital was strangely reassuring. We had driven into LA so many times that the road had become an extension of home. It was only three hours through Barstow, Victorville, Palmdale. Most of the ride was sand and sagebrush. Nothing disturbed the desert, not the occasional clump of gas stations and fast-food shacks, not the outlet mall where my friends sold cheap luggage to tourists on their way to Vegas. We considered taking the Cajon Pass, a route I associated with fierce winds that toppled trailer trucks, but decided on the 138, a winding two-lane road known as the Deathtrap Highway. Every week, some exhausted driver would swerve into oncoming traffic. Normally, we found a big truck and stayed behind it, like a running back with a blocker. That morning, desperate for speed, we careened around every car on the road.

The sun had yet to rise, but the night was already lifting, a vague blue shadow slouching toward the hills. I watched my mother’s face, afraid to ask how she was feeling. Her mouth was clenched tight. Her long dark hair flapped in the wind. I looked out at the desert. The air was painfully clear. My brother was hurt. My mother was driving us to the hospital. There was nothing to keep my mind from her face or his.

Then came the Joshua trees. In school, I learned that Mormon pioneers had coined the name. The towering yucca, its branches twisting upward, reminded them of Joshua reaching his hands up in prayer. The first time my brother and I drove that road, he stopped the car next to a
thick grove. Without explanation, he slid out of the driver’s seat, crossed in front of the car, and walked twenty feet off the road to the base of a towering tree. I figured he was going to pee, but he waved me toward him. I climbed out and pulled on a baseball cap. It was hot, and I could smell the highway roasting in the sun. He placed his big hands on the jagged spines of the tree, turned to me, and smiled: “They’re softer than they look.”

Speeding toward the hospital, I thought about his hands on that Joshua tree. He was always doing that kind of thing, putting his hands in a river or on a rock, finding new ways to touch the world. I thought about his hands and tried not to think about his face, what they had done to his face.

I was fourteen. My brother, seven years older, was my best friend and the closest thing I had to a father. When I was seven and we still lived in the city, the Domino’s Pizza guy was mugged outside our home. We had iron bars over our windows, but I was still too scared to sleep. My brother sat by my bed, held my hand, and told me that there was only one tool that could cut through those iron bars. It had a diamond blade that cost thousands of dollars. Even with that special saw, it would still take robbers more than three hours to cut through one bar, and the high-pitched squeal of the saw would wake everyone in the neighborhood. I slept deeply from then on.

The sun had risen by the time we reached the hospital, yet the hallways were strangely silent. We met the doctor in a tiny room—too bright, too clean—crowded with white plastic chairs. I have no memory of what he said, perhaps because I was overwhelmed by what came next: my brother in the hospital bed, his face covered in white bandages, dark blood seeping through the gauze. The air smelled of antiseptic. He forced a grin, of course, always trying to make us happy. When we were in the room with him, I believed that everything would be fine, but when I stepped into the hall, a shadow washed over my eyes, and I woke up on the floor. I had passed out. Worried about a concussion, the doctors put me in the room next door. Our poor mother—her father gone, and now both her sons in the hospital.

I wish I could have shown her that it would be OK, that we would be OK, at least for a while. I wish I could have brought her forward six years to that night in San Francisco when my brother opened the
Fillmore, wearing that black patch that would become his trademark, the patch that hid more than one secret where his eye had once been.

The crowd was pulsing like a vein. The lights dimmed. The bass rumbled. Smoke filled the air. Everyone screamed when he ran onto the stage. His arms cut through the smoke like the wings of a giant bird. As the spotlight lit up his face, bags of pot rained down on the stage. He picked one up, held it in the air, and screamed into the mic: “You ready to rock the Fillmore?!”

I looked around the crowd and thought, none of these people know what this means to him. They had not seen him perform Michael Jackson routines in the supermarket line. They had never woken to him belting, again and again, the same ten-second clip from George Michael: *If you love me, say you love me, but if you don’t, just let me go-o-o!* Unless they knew Peter Slate the man as well as XL the rapper—how could they know that this was his dream?

He was onstage at the Fillmore. One of the pillars of 1960s counterculture, the Fillmore hosted almost every major performer of the era: the Doors, Jefferson Airplane, Jimi Hendrix, Santana, the Who, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd. The Grateful Dead played the venue more than fifty times, cementing its reputation as the mecca of the counterculture. My brother was not the first person to wave a bag of weed from that stage. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Hunter S. Thompson remembers spending night after night “half-crazy” at the Fillmore, steeped in wild music and drug-induced euphoria. Now, it was Cypress Hill rocking the room, and my brother hyping the crowd.

XL the II. The name fit. He was always a big guy and had gained weight in his twenties. The reference to his eye made sense too. The patch suggested a certain toughness, a street-hardened authenticity that couldn’t hurt an aspiring rapper, especially someone who had not grown up in Compton or the Bronx, someone with a White little brother tagging along. Cypress Hill was of the street in a way Peter Slate was not. The patch bridged that gap, but not as a mask or a disguise. Sure, it helped him look hard, but what was it—that black flag across his face—if not a sign of his own mortality?

I don’t know how my brother joined the Cypress Hill family. Every-
one told me he’d always been around. Maybe that was true in a way. XL was born through his ties to Cypress Hill. But Peter Slate definitely wasn’t there at the beginning. He was still crooning teenage love songs with his boy band, Up N’ Comin, when two Cuban American brothers, Senen Reyes (Sen Dog) and Ulpiano Sergio Reyes (Mellow Man Ace) became the nucleus of a new rap group. The year was 1988, after the Sugarhill Gang and KRS-One, before Tupac and Snoop Dogg and Biggie Smalls. Hip-hop had gained mainstream attention but was only just becoming an industry of its own. Cypress Hill helped define hip-hop by stretching its boundaries—musically, personally, and racially. The Reyes brothers partnered with an Italian American DJ, Lawrence Muggerud (DJ Muggs), and Louis Freese (B-Real), the son of a Cuban mother and a Mexican father. It doesn’t surprise me that my brother, a mixed-race man, would find his musical home with Cypress Hill. Like him, they lived across racial borders. But their bond was growing up on the wrong side of the tracks, and we were from the Valley! Was it the patch? Did that glass bottle that shattered his eye open the door to hip-hop stardom?

Let’s call him Steven—the one who started the fight, not the one who hit my brother with the bottle. I found his real name and phone number in the police report, and now I’m sitting on my front porch in a camping chair, working up the courage to make the call. It’s a bright fall day in Pittsburgh in October 2014. The air smells of leaves and wood smoke. It’s been more than twenty years, but many people keep the same number, and I have to be prepared for Steven to answer the phone. I practice my introduction:

My name is Nico Slate. I’m a historian writing a book about my brother, Peter Slate. He was involved in an incident in the Renaissance Club in Santa Monica on March 22, 1994, an incident you might be able to help me understand.

An incident. A fight. An attack. A crime. My words matter. I need to make clear that I’m not interested in vengeance or even justice. I want only the truth.
Do I want only the truth? I’m fooling myself if I think that I can approach this as a historian and not as a brother. I’m curious, but also angry and confused. I don’t know what I want from this man who bears responsibility for my brother losing his eye, but it’s more than the truth.

A shrill whine erupts across the street. Our compulsive neighbor is cleaning her stairs again. I’m annoyed by her leaf blower and fumble for my headphones. Then, I remember my purpose: I’m calling Steven. My mouth is dry, and I reach for a can of cheap soda water. It’s empty. I consider going inside to make the call. It’s daytime, and I don’t want to use my cell phone minutes. I can use the house phone instead. Strange, how you can think so small and so big in the same moment. Cell phone minutes, soda can, glass bottle smashed across his face, his bright green eye.

It wasn’t a fight, really. According to the police report and all the witnesses I tracked down, my brother and Steven had only a few seconds of tense confrontation before another man entered from the side with a beer bottle. The police never identified that man. When I spoke with the police sergeant, he used a phrase that I thought was reserved for the movies: “The file is cold.”

_The file is cold._ The sergeant’s voice sounded defensive. He knew that he had nothing to tell me that I wanted to hear. “It isn’t like today,” he explained, “where there would be a hundred cameras recording everything.” The idea lingers. If only I could see that moment from a hundred angles, like the Buddhist goddess of compassion, Guanyin, whose thousand arms stretch out to comfort the suffering. Even if I get through to Steven, all he can offer are his own biased memories. If I had footage, even just one grainy recording, I would pore over it, searching for clues. Instead, I go back to the police report:

W1 [witness 1] said she had been dancing with Slate near the edge of the dance floor when Slate appeared to ask S2 [suspect 2], who was standing near the dance floor, to take Slate’s beer bottle and put it down for him. An argument ensued between Slate and S2 and suddenly S1 [suspect 1] came from the side, in W1’s peripheral vision, and swung at Slate’s face with a bottle. W1 did not see S1 because it happened so fast. As we were talking S2 walked out and was standing by the rear door of Renais-
sance when W1 pointed him out as being the one who Slate had been arguing with immediately before the incident.

S2 is Steven. He is White, 5'10", 155 pounds, brown hair, hazel eyes, medium complexion, brown shirt, black cap, twenty-two years old. Now, he would be forty-six. He might have kids. They might be home when I call.

S1 swung the bottle. He’s also White, twenty-five to twenty-seven years of age at the time, 5'10", 170 pounds, brown hair, wearing a blue shirt. I don’t know his name, only his crime: assault with a deadly weapon. That’s what the report says. Nothing about motive. Nothing about the role that race played that night.

Mom remembers the police deeming it a hate crime. Her certainty makes me suspicious. I ask Uncle Dan, expecting him to corroborate my doubts, but he also remembers it as a hate crime and adds that the man who swung the bottle yelled, “We got the n*****r.”

The police sergeant informs me that the hate-crime law did not exist when my brother was attacked, and so “it couldn’t have been reported as a hate crime.” That’s only partially true. It wasn’t until September 1994, six months after the attack, that the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act heightened the penalties for federal hate crimes. But the first hate-crime statute in California had been passed in 1978, and the Civil Rights Act of 1968 had allowed federal prosecution of anyone who “willingly injures, intimidates or interferes with another person, or attempts to do so, by force because of the other person’s race, color, religion or national origin.”

I am tempted to play the historian card, to explain to the policeman that there was a hate-crime law in California when my brother was attacked. Instead, I thank him and hang up with most of my questions unanswered. I could blame my fear of conflict, but something bigger constrains me, something that prevents me from calling Steven, something I must confront before I can uncover the truth about the night my brother lost his eye.

**When I was ten** and he was seventeen, we went camping at a lake ringed by hills. One of the hills pressed up against the lakeshore, its
summit reaching out over the water. The older kids jumped off the edge, their wet skin gleaming in the light as they plummeted toward the dark water. The drop couldn’t have been more than twenty feet, but when my brother asked whether I wanted to try the leap, I was terrified. We were sprawled on inflatable donuts, our gazes turned up toward the cliff. He had no way of seeing my face, yet he sensed my fear immediately. “You don’t need to jump, bro. I get it. It looks like a long way from down here.” He paused, and I could tell that he wasn’t going to leave it there. I could hear the soft lapping of the waves, interrupted by a loud splash every time someone made the leap. “We can just chill here.” He paused again. “I bet the scariest part is right now, just thinking about it. Once you’re in the air, it’s gonna be fast, and it’s gonna be fun.” I stayed quiet, staring up at the edge of that cliff. “If you want to stay here, I’ll stay with you,” he said. “If you want to jump, I’ll jump with you.” I imagined what it would feel like to leap off the side of that hill with my brother. The other kids wouldn’t have seen us as brothers, his dark brown body against my sunburned pink. I didn’t care. Wherever I was, my brother would be there with me.

Sometimes, I wish we could demolish the entire edifice of race—crumble it like a mountain of glass and push it all into the sea. Then, I remember that night my brother lost his eye, and I know that the wounds of the past are still with us, that we cannot pretend race does not exist if we are to fight racism. I am a White man writing about a Black man, even if I am writing about my brother. I failed to press that police sergeant for the same reason I’m scared to call Steven: the more I learn about my brother, the more I’m forced to recognize the distance between us. That’s what drives me to forget my own place in our divided world. I cannot know my brother if I do not know myself, but knowing myself means accepting that I cannot fully know my brother. Steven and I share more than I want to admit.

I’m still sitting on the porch in my camping chair, gripping my phone with both hands, too scared to make the call. Steven might not be a skin-
head or a member of the Klan. Maybe he’s just an average White guy who doesn’t think much about race. Maybe jealousy explains what happened that night. My brother had a way with women. There was something about him—his boyish face, his green eyes—that made him hard to overlook. It wasn’t just that he was 6’6” and 200 pounds. He loved to party, to dance and laugh and sing. Maybe the attackers were jealous.

Maybe they were jealous and drunk. Everyone was drinking. Later, my brother would blame the booze for his own behavior, his failure to protect himself. If Steven and his friends were also drunk, their actions cannot be separated from the effects of alcohol.

One witness offers a third explanation: he says that the girl was overweight and that the attackers were making fun of her. My brother defended her, and that’s what sparked the conflict. I like this interpretation; Peter Slate loved being the chivalrous stranger. Yet even if things escalated because he was defending the girl, even if everyone had been drinking, it remains unclear why it was my brother who ended up in that alley, bleeding from what had been his right eye.

All the witnesses said that the men were watching him dance with the girl. Maybe they thought, “That Black guy deserves to be taught a lesson.” Maybe they used the N-word, as Uncle Dan remembers being told. Maybe they didn’t. I try to put myself at that table, another White guy drinking beer and watching a tall Black man showing off on the dance floor. I close my eyes and imagine staring at the crowd, the beer loosening my muscles and heating my blood, the pulse of the music like a tick in my jaw. That tall guy spins and laughs. Who does he think he is? This joker, this clown, this asshole, this . . . somewhere, somehow, I must recognize that he’s Black. Even if I never think the word, it hangs in the air like smoke. In Los Angeles in 1994, as in any American city today, a group of White people could not look at a Black stranger and not see him as Black.

Two witnesses said that they heard Steven and a group of friends congratulating each other after the attack. “We got him good,” they heard someone say. “We got the n*****” is what Uncle Dan remembers my brother telling him. Why doesn’t the police report say anything about the role that race played that night? The report describes the music at the club as “some rap band” and says that “the crowd seemed
especially young, 20–21 years.” The phrase “some rap band” makes me wonder whether the police saw the violence as somehow inevitable. These were the days of Ice-T’s “Cop Killer,” of mass hysteria about gangster rap. I wonder whether that influenced how the police responded to the attack, why they didn’t make any arrests, perhaps even why the security guards let the attacker slip away and instead grabbed my brother and threw him bleeding into the alley. He looked dangerous. He wasn’t a rapper yet, but his skin color already linked him to the violence that many White people associated with hip-hop.

Steven told the police that he was working as a promoter for one of the bands playing that night. The manager of the club denied that Steven had been hired as a promoter. Steven claimed that he was not involved in the fight, that he had been standing far away when the commotion began, yet both police officers noted a splatter of blood on Steven’s right pant leg. That is how they describe it in the report: “a splatter of blood.” My brother’s blood. Blood from what was his eye, dried on the pants of this man I am about to call on the phone. To say what? “Hello, my name is Nico Slate. I am a historian writing a book about my brother, Peter Slate. Do you have blood on your hands?”

I lean back into the camping chair, watch a fat white cloud float across the sky, and try to picture Steven. I have no idea what he looks like, but somehow I try to imagine his face. What about the other man, the one who swung the bottle—what is he doing now? Strange, that the hand that brought that sharp glass against my brother’s face might be caressing a child or a dog. Strange, how easy it is to put myself at that table, to look across the color line the way those men looked at my brother. That man is different from me. That Black man is different from me—and from that difference, the bottle swings.

I’m wasting time. I take a deep breath and dial the number. It rings twice and then: “The number you have dialed is disconnected or no longer in service.” I breathe out, let my head sag into the chair, and a memory returns.

I’m seven years old, sitting in a dark movie theater, straining to see over the seat in front of me. It’s my birthday, and my brother has brought me to see The Three Amigos. He folds his puffy jacket and slides it under my butt. He’s only fourteen, but there is nothing but confidence in his face. His high cheeks, his strong jaw, his smooth brown
I always looked up to my brother. (Author's collection.)
skin—all of him lit up by that magical flickering movie-screen light. He tells me to sit up as tall as possible and tilt my baseball cap upward. The idea is that no one will sit behind us. Just as the movie starts, we move one row back, leaving two open seats in front of us. I don’t remember whether the trick worked, whether those seats remained empty, but I can still feel the thrill of sitting next to my brother, straining my body up toward his glowing face.

On August 31, 1997, the day after Peter Slate turned twenty-five, and three years after he lost his right eye, a Mercedes-Benz W140 collided with a concrete pillar in the Pont de l’Alma tunnel in Paris. The car’s most famous passenger, Princess Diana, died a few hours later. Also killed were the driver, Henri Paul, and Diana’s boyfriend, Dodi Fayed. The son of an Egyptian billionaire, Fayed was a film producer whose credits included *Chariots of Fire*, *Hook*, and *The Scarlet Letter*. He had purchased the rights to one of my brother’s screenplays but hadn’t come through with the money.

I was entering college that fall; that’s my excuse for not knowing more about my brother’s relationship to Fayed. I didn’t realize it then, but going to college would begin a long period of distance between us. He knew that my going to college would strain our connection, just as he knew that I was more nervous about college than I would admit. Maybe that’s why he insisted on dropping me off at campus for my first semester, why he never mentioned Fayed on that long drive up the Central Valley. He didn’t want to confuse my anxieties with his own.

Ten minutes from campus, he shocked me by stopping at Fry’s Electronics to buy me my first computer. It was 1998, and a personal computer was a luxury. It was the kind of thing he had done throughout my life—surprise me with a gift that showed that he supported my dreams. He knew that I needed his love to survive those first weeks of college. He also knew that I would find my footing, that I would come home a different person.

Years later, Mom told me that just after they left my dorm, my brother pulled over to the side of the road. He felt as if he had forgotten something back at the dorm. It was me—he was missing me. He thought
back to all those times he had dropped me off at a friend’s house or at school. He would always be back to pick me up. Now, he was saying goodbye for months and, in some ways, forever. The child he was dropping off would never return. He put the car into park and wept.

We talked less and less over the course of that year, and whole episodes of his life passed me by, including his dealings with Fayed. I stored those dealings in the category of “stories I exaggerated as a child”—like that epic ninja battle that turned out to be a couple of teenagers in Halloween costumes. It would be years before I realized my mistake, before I stumbled upon evidence that Fayed did owe my brother money, a lot of money, and that the trouble with Fayed was linked to the night my brother lost his eye.

It’s a Tuesday, Election Day, in November 2014. I’m sitting at the kitchen table, eating a banana smeared with peanut butter, trying to decide how to vote in the local Pittsburgh races that never make the news. It’s cold, and I’m draped in a red wool blanket. I open my computer to look up a particular candidate but instead google, “Peter Slate Dodi Fayed,” and before I can swallow a bite of banana, I’m reading about my brother in Variety magazine. The article, “High Price for Payday,” describes his screenplay Rave as a crime thriller focused on a female cop hunting a serial killer in the “post-punk nightclub scene.” Fayed had purchased the script “for low-six figures.” Several first-time screenwriters had recently landed lucrative deals, but “perhaps no one deserves the money more than Peter Slate.” While “doing research” for the script, the article explains, my brother was “coldcocked on the dance floor of a punk club in Santa Monica . . . stabbed in the face with a broken bottle, and lost his eye.” I look up from my laptop, lean back against the cold metal chair, and close my eyes. I can taste the salt of the peanut butter, and I’m crying.

Is the story true? I know that the Renaissance wasn’t exactly a “punk club” and that Peter Slate wasn’t “doing research” that night, but the description of the screenplay is accurate, and I need to know whether that script is linked to my brother losing his eye. I take another bite of banana, close the Variety article, and scroll through the search
I'm about to close my laptop when a link draws my eye to an Associated Press article that was published in newspapers across the country. Readers learned that my brother had sued Fayed's estate after the car crash with Princess Diana and that the judge dismissed the case when my brother failed to appear in court. It's bizarre that my brother would be mixed up with a figure like Fayed, bizarre that the names Dodi Fayed, Peter Slate, and Princess Diana were lumped together by readers of the *Pantagraph* in Bloomington, Illinois, and the *Kokomo Tribune* in Kokomo, Indiana. I imagine old couples discussing this peculiar anecdote over breakfast. I wonder whether their questions were the same as mine: Why didn't he show up in court? Was the script ever turned into a movie?

My brother wrote more than a dozen screenplays, fourteen by my count. He loved unfolding a story. Often, in the middle of a conversation, he would stumble upon a new idea for a script and whip out a mini-recorder: “The scene is the Mall of America. A legion of demons breaks through the glass windows and descends upon the terrified shoppers. Our hero looks up and smiles.” That mini-recorder went everywhere with him. Later, I would find boxes filled with tiny tapes, each one packed with ideas for scripts, songs, stories, even jokes (he tried stand-up for a while). One of his scripts made it to video, but he knew that it was nearly impossible to get one onto the big screen. Still, he kept writing, even after his hip-hop career began to heat up and he landed a radio gig on Power 106. He kept writing because he loved to write and because he coped with failure by digging deeper into his dreams.

A few months after he lost his eye, we spent a week together in the desert. It was hot, and we slept with the windows open. The spring rains had gone, and the air that trickled in was parched and unsatisfying. One night, I awoke at three in the morning, covered in sweat. I stumbled toward the bathroom to pee and found him sitting on the couch, his computer on his lap, working on a new script. He looked up at me. “This one’s really coming together,” he said. “My hero is coming to life.” His face glowed with computer light. Still half-asleep, I stared at him, then used the bathroom and staggered back toward my bedroom. Something stopped me in the doorway, and I leaned back toward him. “Tell me about him in the morning. Your hero.” He looked up and smiled.
I finish the banana, put the peanut butter back on the shelf, and stare at the photo of my brother that hangs on our fridge. He's wearing the patch, the black elastic strap snug across his forehead. It looks too tight, and I feel a strange urge to pull it off.

That night, something wakes me at two in the morning. I check to see whether my son is having a bad dream. No, he's sound asleep. I'm too awake to go back to bed and so take my laptop to the bathroom, where I won't disturb my wife, Emily. I open a browser, planning to read the news, but google Steven instead. I know his full name, birthdate, and address in 1994. Nothing works. I try Facebook; too many men share his name. I scroll through their photos until my eyes ache, then close my laptop and stare at its shiny aluminum skin. The bathroom floor is cold against my feet. Suddenly, I remember the friend who offered Steven an alibi that night, the friend who told the police that she was with him in the VIP room while my brother was assaulted on the dance floor. Her name is less common. I open the laptop, and within seconds I am reading her Facebook profile. What am I to do with this person I have never seen, never spoken to, this person who twenty years ago lied to protect the men who took my brother’s eye? I ask her to become my “friend.”

My eyes are aching, my back hurts, and my feet are freezing. I should have put my slippers on. I’m exhausted and want to go back to bed, but I need to explain to this woman why I sent her a “friend” request. I copy and paste the language I had prepared for my phone call with Steven:

My name is Nico Slate. I am a historian writing a book about my brother, Peter Slate. He was involved in an incident in the Renaissance Club in Santa Monica on March 22, 1994, an incident you might be able to help me understand.

Then, I reconsider. Why does this woman need to know that I’m a historian? Does it make what I’m doing less threatening? In that case, maybe I shouldn’t mention that Peter Slate is my brother. I could feign complete objectivity. That would be lying, of course. Maybe I’m already lying to myself, to think that I can write this book as a historian and
as a brother and not have to choose, to think that writing about the violence my brother faced as a Black man will somehow bring us closer.

I send the message unchanged and close my eyes. The bathroom smells like lavender. I can hear the sound machine coming from the baby’s room, a soft white hiss. My head grows heavy. I rest it on my hands and think back to that long drive through the desert and my brother in his hospital bed trying to make me laugh, half of his face shrouded in white bandages. We called it the “dressing,” a strange word that the doctors used and that we adopted without discussion. The nurses changed it once a day, always when we were gone. After the first day, it was easy to forget what was underneath those bandages. But the morning that we arrived at the hospital, a dark shadow stained the dressing where his right eye used to be, a circle of blood we could not ignore. It shifted every time he smiled.

It’s his first night home from the hospital, and we’re in the kitchen.

The countertops are cluttered as usual: duct tape, a ruler, a pair of socks, like an open-air junk drawer. He floats an idea: maybe we should remove the dressing. Maybe we should assess the damage. He has not seen the wound, and neither have we.

The dishes from dinner are piled in the sink, half-covered in soapy water. They will sit there all night. The Slate family way of washing dishes—the soak method. Just as piles of clean clothes sit on the couch for weeks, our sink is rarely without dishes. We are good at procrastination, at not seeing the mess in which we live, until the mess becomes too big to ignore.

“Should we take a look?” He points at the square white bandage that covers what was his eye. His “we” is ambiguous. As he and Mom walk through the living room toward the bathroom, I’m not sure whether I should follow. I’m fourteen and have been treated as an adult for longer than is good for me. He would never tell me not to come, but I don’t know whether I should, especially given that I had passed out in the hospital. I’m afraid that I will let him down again, but I don’t want him to think I can’t handle it. I don’t want him to think his wound is that bad, as if my being there might prove that it isn’t such a big thing after all to lose an eye.
It’s a warm night in the desert, and we have the swamp cooler on high. The wet air softens the heat, but only if you’re standing within three feet of a vent. Otherwise, the night clings to the skin, hot and dry. I walk over to one of the vents and let the cold air fill my shirt like a balloon. I take a deep breath, then stride toward my brother.

As I enter the bedroom, I hear him call out in pain. It’s not a scream but a sharp gasp, followed by my mom’s voice, almost a whisper, “I’m sorry.” “It’s OK,” he says. I’m standing two feet from the door of the bathroom, close enough to smell the antiseptic spray we have been given to wash the wound. I wait, unsure whether to go in or to retreat to the kitchen. They are quiet now, and they stay quiet for what feels like a long time. Finally, I force myself to round the corner. I see her first, standing behind him, the bandages in one hand, the other hand resting on his back. They look like a Renaissance fresco, the mother blessing the child.

My brother stares intently in the mirror. His wound is on the other side of his body, but I can see it in the mirror. A gash, pink and purple, cuts across his eyebrow and down his cheek. Where his eye had been, a hole deep and red, “inflamed” the doctors might say, as if it were on fire. I don’t want to stare. I don’t want him to see me stare, but I cannot look away. So, I stand there, trying to be casual, as if every night after dinner we gather in Mom’s bathroom to air our wounds.

Ten years later, I’m back in the desert. It’s the winter of 2003, and I’m a few months shy of my twenty-fourth birthday. I feel all grown-up in that way that only a kid can feel, as I stand on the back deck, a thin wool blanket pulled over my shoulders, looking out over the windswept sage. It’s really blowing now, a hard December gale that tears across the dry lake and over the dunes, rocking our mobile home like a ship at sea. I turn my back on the wind and walk into the kitchen, locking the deadbolt to keep the door from blowing open. The kitchen is dusty and cluttered, a pile of dishes in the sink. I pass through the living room, covered with half-packed boxes, and step into Mom’s old bedroom. I stop near the spot where I had waited all those years earlier, when the two people I loved most in the world had huddled together with a pack of bandages and a can of antiseptic spray.
The silence is broken by a quiet whistling, as if one of the windows is open. I check them, one by one; they’re all shut and locked. The whistling persists. Is there a crack in the roof? I look up just as a strong gust hits the side of the house. It feels like the roof might pull right off, exposing our mess to the sky.

I turn to my left and step into Mom’s closet, stuffed with boxes that need sorting. Most of this junk is bound for the dumpster. I pry the lid off an old box and start to rummage through when a large manila envelope catches my eye. It’s labeled “Peter” in Mom’s handwriting, with a heart drawn carefully around the name. It’s the heart that makes me pull the envelope out of the box. As I pry open the metal clasp, a glossy photo slips onto the floor. I look down and then away reflexively, as if pulling my finger back from a flame. It’s a photo of my brother’s eye socket, shattered and bloodied. It must have been taken at the hospital after the attack. I look back again, but not for long. It’s not disgust that makes me look away—more like guilt. I feel guilty seeing my brother’s wound without his permission and ashamed by how quickly I look away. I turn the photo over, sit down on the floor, and pull the rest of the papers from the envelope. The wind rocks the house; the windows rattle.

Beneath a stack of terrible photos, each of which I look at as quickly as I can, I find a document I did not know existed, a document that I will study again and again for years: the police report. It’s the first time I’ve seen it. In the months after the attack, I had cycled through the same unanswered questions: What happened? And why? With time, my focus shifted to my brother and his recovery and then, more quickly than I like to admit, back to the petty preoccupations of my own life. In my hands, in this police report, is a chance to return to that night with a new sense of purpose. As I read through the conflicting witness testimonies and official summaries, I begin a quest that will drive me to become a historian and to focus my research on the violence and trauma that shaped my family and this country.

It wasn’t the police report that most startled me that day. It was a single sheet of thin, crepelike paper that became the foundational clue in my quest to understand my brother’s life, to make sense of his evolution from a shy mixed-race kid to a rapper, screen writer, radio show host, and aspiring reality TV star—XL the 1I, that towering Black man
who filled the stage at the Fillmore. It was the historian’s favorite kind of find, a document that reveals not only through what it says but also through what it hides, and it startled me even more because I found it pressed amid those horrific images. Our mother, for reasons I still don’t understand, had slipped among the carnage of the hospital photos an original copy of my brother’s birth certificate.

Sitting on Mom’s floor, staring at that birth certificate, I learned something I would come to see again and again as a historian—that the smallest detail can reframe a life, a family, a social movement, or an entire historical era. It was his name. I knew that he hadn’t been born Peter Slate. Long before he became XL the 11, he had left behind his original name, the name his father had given him: Uderulu Osakwe. I don’t know why, but sitting on the floor, listening to the wind, and bringing that name to my lips, I saw how my brother embodied the story of a people—a people born, like him, in the space between Africa and America. The wounds he bore on his body were part of a larger history of suffering and struggle. I saw those wounds as if for the first time, and I realized that I would never know my brother if I couldn’t explain what had happened to him that night he was attacked, and that I’d never be able to explain that night if I couldn’t understand everything that came before.

Should I start at the beginning? His, not mine.
I ask Mom to tell me the story of his birth.
I have two kids now. I wish he knew them.
I ask Mom to tell the story.
I don’t tell her that I can’t imagine what she has lived through.
I say, “Tell me the story again.”
And she does.