

Between Floors

Josette Graham

Course: English 101

Instructor: Mr. Chris Genre

Essay Type: Profile

The streets of New Orleans were crowded with people ready to celebrate the night with daiquiris, loud music, and fine cuisines. It was easy to get lost in the crowd, but then I saw her. Nobody was throwing her Mardi Gras beads to celebrate her existence. She sat on a gray plastic milk crate at the corner of Bourbon and Canal Street, cognizant of the passing tourists. She met each of their stares with a cynical smile and an involuntary flick of her middle finger. Her rough behavior captivated me, and I found myself wanting to learn more about her.

"Who dem folks tink dey are, gawking at me like I some filthy pig, you know," she snorted with a rich southern accent. She pointed to her house and laughed, "Boxes don' mean stupid, you know."

Despite her situation, pride and sassiness accentuated her bearing. Though smudged with grease and decorated with tattered rags, she displayed self-confidence. Patches of dirt altered her complexion from honey brown to an ashy coal black. Seven monstrous dreadlocks swarmed her head like maggots at the bottom of a trashcan; the stench was almost enough to make me vomit.

Her smile showed no evidence of dental care. The discoloration of her gums showed periodontal disease had taken its toll, casing me to appreciate the sound of a dentist's drill. The bottom front row of her teeth had been replaced with sharp, jagged chunks of enamel. It looked like the skyline of New York City.

Her legs, long and dark, were parted slightly, letting her usual clients know she was "open" for business. She stood up reaching for my hand, anxious to give me the tour of her

block. I yanked my hand away from her with an exaggerated jerk, associating myself with the rest of society. Though not spoken, I could tell I made her feel uncomfortable. She laughed, and we both searched anxiously to find common ground.

She lit a cigarette and turned away from me. "Well, it's almost time for me to start work, you know. Friday's my busy nights." She pointed to the other ladies across the street dressed in fishnets and halter-tops, and they looked at me with contempt as if I was a new streetwalker.

I followed twenty feet behind her until we reached McDonald's. Golden arches, to me, represented weight gain and chocolate shakes; for her, they represented livelihood and financial well-being. I entered the restaurant and took a seat closest to the large front window that advertised two picture perfect value meals. The window became my bridge to the unknown that I had only experienced through movies like *Pretty Woman* and late night HBO *Street Documentaries*.

I could clearly make out the words which flowed from her mouth. "Hey Baby," she called out to the young teenage boys who collectively laughed at her interest in them. They walked right past, leaving her with their cruel remarks. She took their insults like a lioness on a prowl. She hiked her skirt up an inch and preyed upon her next victim.

The streetlights illuminated her cherub face and gave me the impression she was no older than sixteen. Hurt struck a nerve in my heart as I watched her walk around the corner with a man old enough to be her father. He grinned because her body meant temporary pleasure and forgetfulness of his worries. He violated her youth as he slapped her on her ass and pulled on her like an unwilling dog. She followed because his business meant food on the table.

Five minutes later, she returned by herself. The pride and confidence she first exerted was replaced with sadness and defeat. Her laughing spirit had been broken into a thousand pieces. Lipstick was smeared on her cheeks, and her skirt was slightly turned to the left.

The downtown traffic was crowded with police officers on horseback who were oblivious to this poor, young, black, adolescent girl. Each time a police officer passed by, I prayed she might be arrested. I wanted to protect her from the drunkards and rapists who fed off youthful ignorance.

She walked into the restaurant needing to take a rest. "Girl, I only made twenty dollars in two hours, you know."

"No! I don't know," I wanted to scream, but I was only able to give an unemotional nod of my head. I had formulated a thousand questions in my head, but I feared coming off to her as judgmental or narcissistic. I managed to ask, "How long have you been on the streets?" Discomfort crept upon me like a creeping shadow as she looked me straight in the eyes.

"Da streets have been a part of me since I was born. I lived in shelters with my mother until..." She broke eye contact with me, seeming to make a conscious effort to change the subject.

"Your mother," I paused, "where is she at now?" I knew I had struck a nerve because her whole body language changed. She sat erect and crossed her arms as if to tell me to mind my own damn business.

"She dead for all I know. She stopped coming around when I was twelve. She use ta get beat up by different men, and I'm sure one probably killed her; she deserved what she got. I *had* ta survive the streets by myself, and here I am-a prodigy of my mother." She sounded like a

raging bull destined to find satisfaction by insulting her mother's character for the lack of compunction in deserting her daughter.

"Do you have any other family or friends you can turn to?"

She relaxed and smiled, "The streets is my family. This is all I know. One day, one day soon God will rescue me, and I will no longer have to sell my body for food. I do what I have to do to survive, you know." She pulled out a folded magazine article which had been tucked in her bosom. She opened it and pointed to the six young women dressed in white. The title read, "Lost but Found." "Dem girls use ta live on the streets like me, but they have all changed for the betta. Some went ta college; some are doctors and executives of big companies, and some have their own businesses. Dem girls don't have ta worry anymore about struggling in the streets, you know." She stood up as if to tell me our interview was over. She proceeded to walk out the door and looked back at me with confidence and said, "I am just between floors trying ta gain higher ground. I'll make it some day."

I was extremely exhausted when I got home. I was unable to sleep the whole weekend because I felt like a totally different person; she touched my life. I was able to look at different situations in a whole new perspective. I have learned to appreciate the small things in life like toothpicks, rush hour traffic, intelligent conversation, and friendships. I realized even though we have different professions, I am just like her. I, too, am between floors, trying to gain higher ground.

Josette Graham is a History major minoring in English.

Mr. Genre's Comments: *The assignment was a profile essay, and where other students visited fire stations, hospitals, and companies to write their essays, Josette visited the streets. She went beyond the general guidelines of this paper to create a thought-provoking tale of the side of life we generally try to avoid. Through her description and language, we are thrust onto the streets we avoid and see a piece of humanity in a person we try not to see.*