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Racism in America: Past, Present, and Future

Walter B. Levis

A car pulls into a hotel driveway. It's a nice-looking car, a white car, mid-size, with gray trim along the sides of the doors and a silver-colored roof. The car looks freshly washed, gleaming in the summer sunlight. The driver's door opens and a man gets out. He's a nice-looking man, a white man. It's uncanny, but he also looks freshly washed, gleaming in the summer sunlight. He wears a white shirt and white pants and has gray hair and a neatly trimmed gray beard.

Waiting for the car, standing at the curb of the hotel driveway, are two young women in their mid-twenties. They are also white. They notice the similarity between the man's appearance and the car's, and they think it's funny. Years later, they will think it's much more than funny; they will think it's deeply significant: how the driver matched his car.

But right now, at the present moment, the driver directs a smile at them. Then he takes a few quick steps and reaches for their suitcases. They are rolling suitcases with long, collapsible handles. He expertly lowers the handles and lifts the suitcases into the trunk. Neither of the women had noticed that he had popped the trunk.

"Thank you," says Erin. She has milk-colored skin, blonde hair, and a slim, athletic build. She likes to jog.

"No problem," the driver answers.

"We're going to the airport," adds Jenna. She has a darker complexion than her friend. She is olive-skinned, with reddish-brown hair and a thick body. Not a jogger, she lifts weights.

"Yeah, I figured the airport." The driver closes the trunk. He had spoken without looking at them, but now he turns from the closed trunk and again directs a smile at them. "From the suitcases," he adds. And then he winks. But it's a friendly wink, nothing more.

They all get into the car. It's a pleasant temperature inside the car, a break from the Georgia heat. Erin and Jenna aren't used to the Georgia heat. The car smells faintly, very faintly, of cigarettes.

"You have enough room?" the driver asks. "I can pull my seat forward."

"No, we're fine," Erin says.

"Sure?"

"Yes, really. This is fine," Jenna adds.

They buckle their seat belts and lean back.

"Okey-dokey," the driver says. "Here we go."

The car accelerates smoothly. After a moment, the driver asks them a question. "Are you girls heading home?"

His eyebrows lift as he looks into the rearview mirror and speaks. But there's nothing flirty in his eyebrows. He's just making conversation. Friendly conversation, nothing more. Erin and Jenna don't mind being called "girls." It bothers them a little, yes—but this is the South, right? They had talked about it. They had prepared themselves. They had deliberately chosen to visit Savannah.

Now, a tiny glance passes between them. It passes so quickly that it's almost imperceptible. In that millisecond, they exchange the kind of wordless communication only shared by best friends. And they are "best friends," and they always will be. That's the whole point of this weekend together: to celebrate their friendship. In a few short weeks, Erin is headed to San Francisco to attend graduate school, a Master of Social Work; Jenna will be studying business in Boston. Actually, it's Cambridge, an MBA at Harvard, but she doesn't like to name-drop. Business for Jenna; social work for Erin. One in Boston; the other, San Francisco. Opposites attract. They have tried to laugh at this, to joke about how far apart they will be geographically, and how it mirrors their growing differences.

"But we're like electrons inside an expanding magnetic field," said Jenna, who is more the "science person" than Erin. "I can feel the toroidal and poloidal forces keeping us together."

"I have no idea how magnetic fields work, but I'm sure you're right," Erin said. "Plus, I know you had a crush on Mr. Richards."

This made both of them giggle. Mr. Richards had been their eighth-grade science teacher.

"It was the hair on his chest," Jenna said. "When he left the top button of his shirt open—"

More giggles, but, in fact, underneath all this is something serious. It isn't entirely conscious. It's not like either of them said, "Let's go to Savannah for a weekend to celebrate our love for each other in spite of our growing differences." They would never talk to each other like that. They met in fifth grade!

But their differences are real—and becoming more pronounced. Privately, Erin thinks Jenna sometimes sounds like a full-blown conservative the way she talks about getting an MBA and the importance of growing the economy, as if capitalism were the solution, not the problem. And, although she keeps it to herself, Jenna often feels like Erin has been brainwashed during college, especially this idea of seeing racism everywhere, as if racializing every aspect of life helps bring people together, when, in fact, it divides everyone further.

But friendship transcends political differences. This is what they want to believe. And that's why this quick-glance-wordless-moment-of-perfect-understanding is so important: Yes, they still have it. A shared decision had been made without a word being spoken: Let's talk to the driver.

"That's right, we're heading home," Erin says, batting first. This is an old joke between them—who goes first? Years ago, they played softball together. Travel ball. Erin, the lanky outfielder, hit in the three-spot; Jenna, who squatted behind the plate, batted clean-up.

"And where's that?" the driver asks. "Where's home?"

"New York City," Jenna says, taking her turn at bat. "We were just here for the weekend."

"Ah! That's where I'm from! The Bronx, actually." The driver sounds excited. "Well, well, well—New Yorkers. How did you like Savannah?"

"Loved it," Erin says. "But we just did the tourist stuff, you know. Forsyth Park, the historic district."

"Nice, very nice," says the driver.

"And the Wormsloe Plantation," Jenna adds.

"Ah, yes, the plantations, important history," the driver responds. "How about the riverboat tour?"

"No, but we did a horse-drawn carriage," Erin says, keeping track of the game, the batting order.

"The carriage ride down here is better than Central Park's, right?" the driver asks. His brows lift again as he looks at the girls in the rearview mirror. He adjusts the mirror slightly with one hand while resting the limp wrist of his other hand lightly at the top of the steering

wheel, his fingers dangling loosely. A confident driver.

The Central Park question calls for a quick glance, a shared shrug. Then Erin steps up.

“Neither of us have ever taken the carriage ride in New York’s Central Park.”

“Actually, neither have I!” The driver laughs. He has a husky laugh, a little phlegmy, like maybe he’d been a heavy smoker. Yes, that makes sense—with the faint smell of the car. You would smoke in your own car, right? Many years later, this detail would matter to Erin and Jenna. They would puzzle over its exact role in the whole story, but agree it was significant, very significant. This was an Uber. And Uber drivers, most of the time anyway, drive their *own* cars. The cars are their *private* property, and that’s the key, the foundational idea: *private property*.

“Ah, New York, New York—the city that never sleeps,” the Uber driver continues, clearing his throat. His eyes flit from the rearview mirror to a side mirror as he smoothly switches lanes.

“How long have you lived in Savannah?” Jenna asks.

“Seven years. But I’m back and forth a lot. Almost once a month I’m up North, back in ol’ New York, Newwww Yorrrk!”

The driver’s effort to add a trace of Sinatra lands with a thud—an awkward, dead silence. It’s Erin’s turn to bat. But this information about the Uber driver—that he goes back and forth between Savannah and New York once a month—it strikes her as, well, kind of weird. She doesn’t like having such a *judgy* reaction, but she can’t help it.

“Wow,” Erin says, very softly. “That’s a lot of traveling.”

“Yeah, I was a high school teacher in the Bronx for thirty-one years—Truman High, 750 Baychester Ave.”

The Uber driver exhales loudly, emotionally, as if the address of the school were a tender topic. Erin and Jenna look at each other. Now, they both feel it—this guy is a little weird. But that’s part of the fun, right?

“The belly of the beast,” the Uber driver goes on. “Tough area around that high school, but I loved it. And I miss it. Especially now that I’m a farmer!” He laughs quietly, letting his shoulders bounce a little, shaking his head side to side, as if this were hard to believe.

In fact, Jenna and Erin do find it hard to believe. This retired high school teacher turned Uber driver is, actually, a farmer?

Jenna asks, “You have... like... a real farm?”

“Exactly,” the Uber driver says. And he nods and smiles, clearly

pleased that Jenna sounds incredulous. “Forty acres,” he goes on. “Just like the line: forty acres and a mule. You know where that’s from?”

Yes, they know where it’s from.

“After the Civil War ended,” Erin answers, as if she’d raised her hand and been called on. “That’s how much land the freed slaves were supposed to be given.”

“Close, very close,” the Uber driver says. “Technically, it was *before* the war ended. You see, it was April 9th, 1865, when Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia, but the last battle was fought at Palmito Ranch, Texas, on May thirteenth. And this makes you wonder, right? Why did they keep fighting for an extra month in Texas? Well, that’s Texas for you!”

The Uber driver laughs. He laughs so hard that he starts to cough. Neither of the girls laughs. But the driver laughs for several seconds even after he starts to cough. Then he looks up into the rearview mirror and does that little brow lift again. He seems surprised that the girls are not laughing along with him.

“The line ‘forty acres and a mule,’” he continues, his voice short of breath—choked and dry. “The line actually comes from a wartime order proclaimed by Union General William Sherman on January 16, 1865, which is before the war ended. There was significant support for the plan from then-Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton as well as abolitionists like Charles Sumner and Thaddeus Stevens. But, of course, it all fell apart after Abraham Lincoln was assassinated.”

The girls exchange a glance. Then Erin lifts her phone and sends a text to Jenna.

Mr. Kleinman?

That was the name of their tenth-grade history teacher. Jenna smiles, rolls her eyes, turns her phone around—Google Maps shows another twenty-one minutes to the airport.

“I’m sorry,” the Uber driver says, as if he knows what Jenna and Erin are thinking. “I don’t mean to turn this into history class. I taught history for—well, a long time. Anyway... I’m just very, very, very proud of owning property. It’s really something else, something... amazing... It’s a feeling that’s hard to describe.”

He leans back in his seat, holding the steering wheel with just two fingers. He seems to be genuinely trying to consider the best way to describe this “amazing feeling” of owning property.

Now the conversation feels so weird that both Erin and Jenna are already thinking about how they will laugh at all this later. “The Uber Driver in Savannah.” This little story will be added to their years and years of shared stories. Which is what friendship is all about, right? Shared stories. They have plenty. Just last night, while getting drunk on margaritas, they told all kinds of old stories, including one about their *first* time getting drunk, when they were in eighth grade, and each of them stole two bottles of beer from their parents and met in Riverside Park, where they sat on a wooden bench near the tennis courts and looked out at the Hudson River and forced themselves to drink all four bottles, which did, in fact, get them pretty drunk. And then they called two boys they liked and—well...that’s a whole other topic. How Jenna and Erin shared the drama of all that. Sex, boyfriends, breakups. They always seemed to see and feel life’s dramas in the same way. And when they disagreed—well, they counted on each other to be blunt and brutally honest. In fact, while drinking and telling stories last night, they recalled some memorable moments of disagreement. One time, not that long ago, during college, Jenna and her then-serious boyfriend Steve were celebrating six months of being together, and Jenna had bought some “special occasion” lingerie to wear. This was during Christmas break, with both of them home from college—Jenna back from Amherst; Erin from Tufts. Jenna’s big night with Steve was set for the first weekend everyone would return to campus after the holiday, but Jenna wanted Erin’s opinion about the lingerie. They joked about how a million years earlier they had been showing each other their first bras!

So there they were in Jenna’s childhood bedroom at her parents’ apartment on the Upper West Side, and Jenna stepped out of the attached bathroom and walked into the middle of the room. Then she turned slowly, like a fashion model, shifting her weight from one hip to the other. “Well...?”

“It’s horrible,” Erin said, flatly.

Jenna froze, as if Erin’s words had paralyzed her. Her arms and legs and shoulders and neck—even her face felt locked in place, her mouth hanging open. She wasn’t sure if she could get her lips to work.

She looked down at the one-piece teddy and slowly fingered the fabric, feeling the dainty, lacy bra. “Wh-wh-what’s wrong with it?” she said, finally. And then she let the tips of her fingers pass over the super-thin embroidered bodice hugging her abdomen, sloping down

her pelvis, narrowing into a tiny, tight V.

“You do realize, don’t you, Jenna? The lingerie industry is run by men. Victoria’s Secret was founded by a *man*—Roy Raymond. Do you get the implication of that?”

The question hung in the air like a bad odor. In fact, Jenna suddenly thought she smelled mildew coming from the bathroom.

“Now,” Erin continued, dropping her voice down a notch, adopting that listen-to-me-closely tone. “I know that the so-called neo-feminists or third-wave feminists or whatever have tried to flip the lingerie narrative and claim that women are expressing their freedom and all that, but—I mean, really, Jenna, is that, like, comfortable to wear? Does that make you feel, like, somehow liberated?”

Jenna didn’t answer, not right away. She took a long, slow breath. There was definitely a mildew smell. And from outside she heard the faint sound of a siren whooping down West End Avenue. The siren grew louder, then peaked and started to quickly fade. She looked down at the thick blue carpet in her bedroom. It was the same carpet that had been in her room since she was about five years old. The carpet was soft and thick.

“Plus, not to mention,” Erin went on, “there’s the financial aspect of this industry. I mean, there is a minimal amount of fabric there, right? But—well, how much did it cost?”

Again, Jenna didn’t answer. But her limbs had loosened. The surprise and hurt were passing, as if her feelings were being whisked away by that fading siren. She pressed her feet down hard into the carpet. It felt good to grip the wooly fabric with her toes. Then she squeezed her glutes together and felt the wedged-up sensation of the tight-fitting thong. Who was she kidding? This outfit was *not* comfortable to wear. She stepped from the center of the room and lowered herself onto the edge of her bed. Then she looked across the room at Erin. When their gazes met, Erin slid off the desk chair and crawled across the carpet. She kneeled in front of Jenna and put her hands on Jenna’s bare knees.

“You don’t need any of this,” she said softly. “You are the ‘special occasion.’ Who you are—not what you look like.”

Jenna knew that Erin was right. She didn’t want to wear lingerie. But it wasn’t because of what Erin was saying about the politics and all that. It was because she didn’t have the body for it. Too stocky, too muscular. The truth was Erin had the body for wearing lingerie. But... whatever.

“Yeah, I’m the special occasion,” Jenna said quietly. “I get that.”

They had titled that little story “Lingerie for Steve,” and had a good laugh about it last night while drinking their margaritas.

But sometimes it went the other way around. Jenna dished it out. Like during a Covid lockdown when they were Zooming and Erin told about a dorm situation with a bunch of people watching this YouTube video of a cop arresting a Black man. The cop tackled the Black man and punched him. Then this one guy on the lacrosse team, who was standing behind Erin, watching the video from over her shoulder, said, “Wow, what did that guy do?”

Erin paused, waiting for Jenna to say something.

After a moment, Erin said, “Do you see the racism there? How the assumption is that this Black man must be a criminal? And it’s so typical of those lacrosse boys.”

Jenna was sitting at her desk, leaning close to her computer screen. One thing about Zoom: if you’re leaning close to the screen, then every gesture, every tiny change in facial expression is amplified.

“What?” Erin said, almost immediately. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I know—you don’t need to say anything. I can see—I mean, you don’t—? You’re taking the cop’s side?”

“No, I’m not taking the cop’s side. But from the video you don’t—”

“This is just the kind of thing we all need to face, Jenna.” Erin cut her off. “It’s racism.”

“It’s just a question. Did the guy do anything wrong to get arrested? Was he resisting? Is that why he got punched?”

“The *guy*,” Erin said, her voice cracking. “You mean the Black man.”

“You’re the one making it a racial thing.”

“No, you’re the one denying it! The statistics—do you know the statistics about Black people being arrested?”

“That’s aggregate data which may or may not apply to this particular situation.”

“Aggregate data?...Aggregate data? That’s your response to this video? Aggregate data?”

Jenna didn’t answer. She leaned back in her chair, then pushed her laptop away from the edge of the desk. “Look, Erin, to me, racism is the belief that one race is inherently superior to another. That’s my definition. Now, if this cop arrested and punched a Black man for no reason, that’s horrible. Definitely. Obviously—it’s horrible. But asking

a question about the situation? Just asking? If that's racist, then—well, okay, I know you can turn this around on me right now and say that I'm being racist because I don't agree with everything you're saying and the conclusions you're reaching. And—well, okay, then you're just being self-righteous. Then there's nothing I can say."

Both Jenna and Erin leaned back and looked away from their computer screens. Several long moments of silence passed. Then, at exactly the same instant, they both looked back at the screen. And then they quickly looked away. And then another few moments passed. And then...they both looked back again—at exactly the same instant. They hadn't intended to do this, of course, but so it goes. It happened. And then one more time—they looked away and looked back at exactly the same instant. Now, a small smile hovered first at the corner of Jenna's mouth, then Erin's.

"Synchronized swimmers," Jenna said softly, referencing a night from the previous summer when they had gone on a blind double date with two guys who took them to a ridiculously overpriced restaurant in Manhattan. Both Jenna and Erin knew immediately the night was going to be a total bust, so inside the restaurant they told the two boys that they were synchronized swimmers, and then started to time their movements, leaning forward, lifting their glasses, even cutting their food and chewing in unison. They kept it up with a straight face throughout the meal while the boys grew more and more bewildered.

Now Jenna leaned close to her laptop. "If only synchronized eating were an Olympic event..." she said quietly, letting her voice trail off. "We could have won a gold medal for our performance that night."

"Yeah, right," Erin said, and in spite of an effort to stay mad, she couldn't repress her smile. "We missed our calling."

Now Jenna leaned even closer to her computer screen. "That's the word for it—a calling," she said, and noticed that without trying her voice had become an intense whisper. "You, Erin, you have a calling. You have this passion. You—you will change the world. I know you will. You will make it a better place. You will do it. And I love this about you. But don't turn *me* into a social justice project. I mean, this is—*us*, Erin. Not politics—*us*."

Erin didn't answer right away. She took a breath, then said, "I know. Us, right. I'm not trying to turn you into a—whatever. I love you. You know that. I think you're wrong about the video and I think you're being insensitive to my feelings, but..."

She leaned back and turned her palms up, as if to say, what else can I add? There was a long pause. Then Jenna leaned back and lifted her hands, too, and also turned her palms up. And then, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, they both shrugged, their shoulders rising and falling in perfect unison.

* * *

After driving in silence for a few moments, Erin nudges Jenna as they pass the sign for the airport. It's a huge, bright blue-and-white sign framed by two palm trees amidst a giant bed of manicured flowers. In big white letters, it reads: SAVANNAH HILTON HEAD INTERNATIONAL. And underneath the big white caps, in smaller script, it reads: "The Hostess City."

During their visit, they had researched this little "hostess" tagline and learned that Savannah was the oldest city in the state of Georgia and contained one of the largest National Historic Landmark Districts in the country. They also learned that the founder of the Girl Scouts, Juliette Gordon Low, was a famous Savannah resident.

They visited Low's museum house. They stood in front of a statue of the famous woman seated on a bench with her dog. Then Jenna read from her phone about the history of the Girl Scouts.

"Hmmm, you know what their motto is?"

"Ah, words to live by, I'm sure. Will it make me a good hostess? It must involve cookies, right?"

"Very interesting," Jenna mumbled, ignoring Erin's sarcasm. "The Girl Scouts and the Boy Scouts have the *same* motto."

"Yeah? Really? That's surprising. So... what's the motto?" Erin asked.

"Be prepared."

Erin laughed softly. "That's it?"

"Yes," Jenna said. "Be prepared. That's nice. I like it."

"Prepared for what?"

"Well, according to the 1947 Girl Scout Handbook, the motto was explained as 'a Girl Scout is ready to help out wherever she is needed.'"

"Well, that clarifies everything. Keep those cookies with you at all times."

"Oh, stop it—what's the matter with 'Be prepared'? I think those are fine words to live by—"

“And the Boy Scout version is—what? ‘Be prepared—bring a condom!’”

“You’re cynical,” Jenna said. “You know that? You’re a cynic.”

“No, I love their cookies. Damn good cookies. It’s just their politics—and ‘Be prepared’? What is that supposed to mean—? Prepared for what? Now, if the girls were being told to carry a condom, if *that* were spelled out in the handbook—”

“Right,” Jenna cut in, laughing. “Maybe you can make that suggestion.”

Laughing off the awkwardness here worked fine, but not the next time. When they visited another Savannah landmark, the bench where the famous *Forrest Gump* scene took place, “Life is like a box of chocolates,” they once again had different reactions, and this time the feelings were stronger and stranger, and the tension lingered.

“What a dumb movie,” Erin began. “I mean, Tom Hanks, yes. And it had a good soundtrack, those songs from the sixties. But, really, why do you think that movie was so popular? It was so dumb.”

They were standing directly in front of the plaque describing the famous wooden bench. Erin’s pronouncement about the movie being “dumb” left Jenna feeling speechless. It was an awkward silence. They both just stood there, looking around, taking in the beauty of Chippewa Square. It was a perfect summer day, sunny and warm. The landscaped quad, located near the center of the city, was shadowed by towering mossy oak trees, camellias, and spring-blooming azaleas.

“I liked the movie,” Jenna said, finally.

“You did? Have we never talked about this? You actually liked *Forrest Gump*? The message of that movie is—what? Ignorance is bliss?”

“No, you’re totally missing the point,” Jenna said quickly. “The movie is about the simple power of love and friendship and loyalty.”

“Right, but those things are *not* simple! That’s exactly what’s wrong with the movie!”

The emotion in Erin’s voice surprised both of them.

“Okaaaay...” Jenna said, and both she and Erin felt the strain between them like a blast of cold air. It hung in the prickly silence, and they both gave a little shiver as if a wind were flicking at their bare arms.

They dropped the conversation then, but right now, drawing closer to the airport, they are both recalling that tense moment in front of the *Forrest Gump* bench. Then the driver breaks through their thoughts

and asks, "Have either of you girls ever worked on a farm?"

They look at each other. Neither remembers the batting order. "No, never worked on a farm," Jenna says quietly. "Neither of us."

"Exactly," the driver answers, "that's what I figured. That's why I go back and forth to New York, that's my program, you see. That's what I'm really doing! That's what my life is really all about!"

The quality of the Uber driver's voice is immediately recognizable to Erin and Jenna as the edgy excitement of a teacher leading a discussion, trying to make a point by withholding a little information to create tension, hoping to manipulate a student's curiosity.

It works on Erin and Jenna. They are curious.

"What do you mean your 'program'?" Erin asks.

"I take kids out of the Bronx and bring them to live and work on my farm."

"They work on the farm?"

"Yep!"

"What do they do?" Jenna asks.

"Pick cotton, mostly. Hardly anyone realizes that Savannah still produces a lot of cotton."

"They pick cotton?" says Erin, unable to keep the surprise out of her voice.

"Not the old-fashioned way, of course. We have equipment. And they get trained." The Uber driver takes a breath. "You see, here's how it works: I start by going into some of the rough neighborhoods, usually the area around my old high school. It's mostly Black, to be frank, and I know that doesn't sound good. But I look over the kids and round up some of them, especially the nice, strong, young teenage boys, but girls too. And then I bring them down here and set them up on to work on my farm. I feed them and house them, and—"

"Wait—" Erin interrupts. "What do you mean 'round them up'?"

"Not literally. I ask them if they want to get out of the neighborhood and work on a farm instead of—you know, there are *not* a lot of opportunities for some of these kids."

"Do you pay them?" Jenna asks.

"Well, not exactly," the driver says, pulling off the highway and onto the ramp for the airport terminals. "There are expenses involved, you see. The cost of moving them down here, and feeding them and so forth. So initially they are working off their debt."

Jenna says, "Their debt? What if they get down here and don't like

it? I mean, if they don't like farming, then what?"

"Well," the driver says, and he slows the car and switches into the lane marked DEPARTING FLIGHTS. "Occasionally I have someone try to run off, but—they owe me, you know. So I catch 'em. And there are a bunch of us down here working together—other farmers. And law enforcement too. They help out with the runaways."

The car comes to a stop under the sign marked AMERICAN AIRLINES, and Jenna and Erin quickly get out of the car and go to the trunk and take out their suitcases. The driver tries to get out of the car to help them, but they wave him off. Erin holds up her phone to indicate the payment. She can't bring herself to say "thank you." Neither can Jenna.

As the car pulls away, they stand at the curb and look at each other.

Erin speaks first. "Did he just—?"

"Insane," Jenna cuts in.

"Runaways? Did he actually call them runaways? I can't believe—"
Erin's voice is choked with the threat of tears.

"This can't be legal. We can report it. I memorized the license plate and—"

"Report it to who—?"

Jenna raises her voice. "The state, the Chamber of Commerce, I don't know. The Department of Labor or—whatever, it can't be legal. What he's doing cannot—"

"I'm scared," Erin blurts out. "Even if we report it, it's just so..."
She stops herself. Her throat feels tight. She looks at Jenna.

Neither of them knows what to say. They just stand there looking at each other. In the distance is the roar of jet planes, and all around them is the bustle of passengers, but they just stand there looking at each other. Then Erin feels her lip quivering and tears coming on. Jenna sees this and pushes her rolling suitcase out of the way and steps closer to Erin.

"I don't know," Erin goes on, her voice choked. "Something about all this really, really...scares me." She swallows hard.

"Me too," says Jenna, and then neither of them have to ask the other for a hug. They wrap their arms around each other and press their chins into each other's necks, and they both know the feeling of these hugs, the way their bodies fit together, the smell of each other's hair.

To a stranger, it must have looked like Erin and Jenna were two friends (or maybe sisters?) saying goodbye to each other. In fact, years

later, they would look back at this moment and think about how they never did say goodbye to each other. They got on the same plane that day, of course. They were both flying back to New York. But their friendship endured. In fact, eventually, decades later, when they were gray-haired and retired, like the Uber driver had been, they visited Savannah again. They were both grandparents, and they both had lived long and full lives full of trouble and pain. They went back to Savannah—just the two of them—to celebrate their friendship and to see the sights. And everything they saw all those years ago in the past was still there now at this moment... in the future.

The End