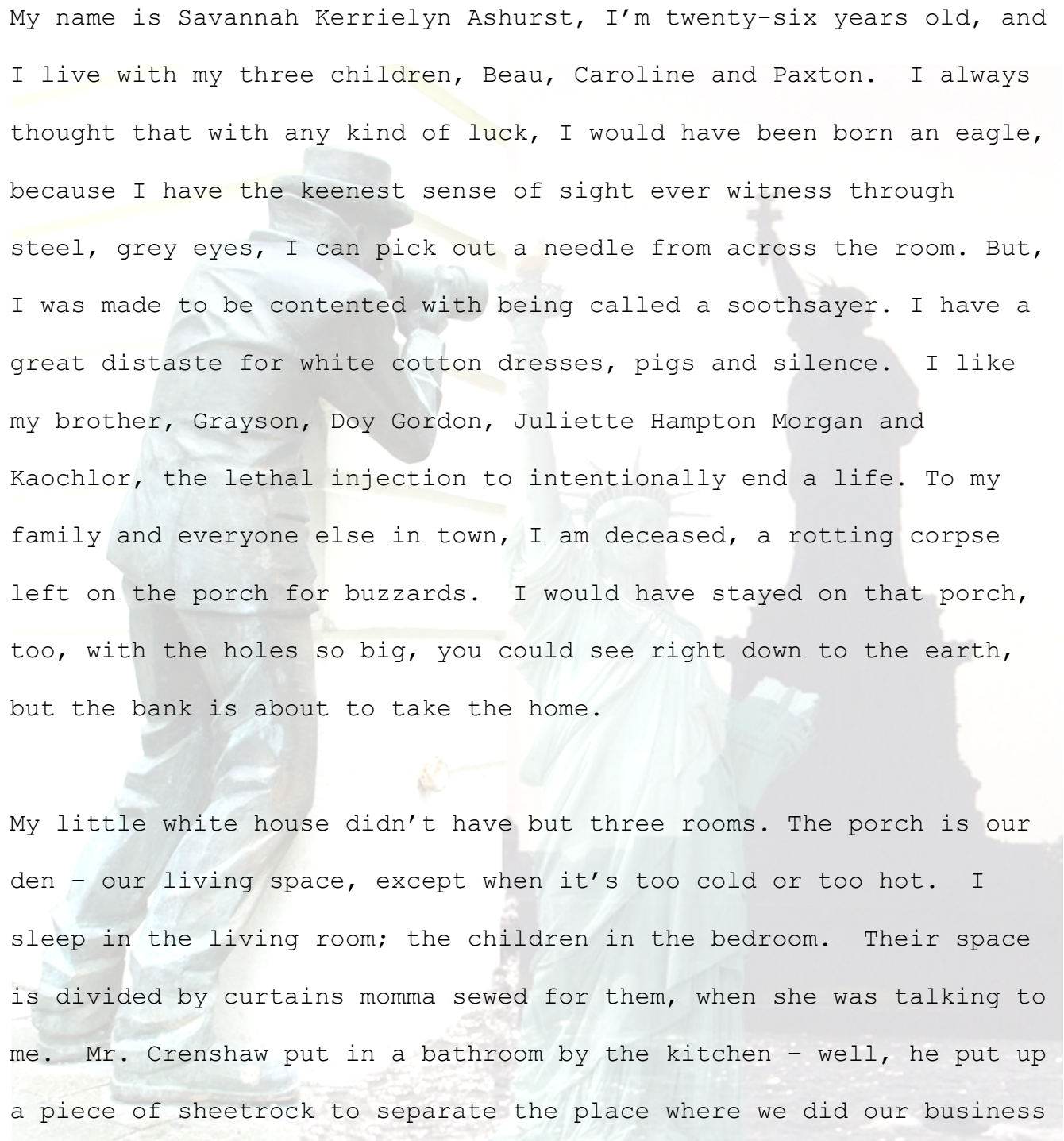
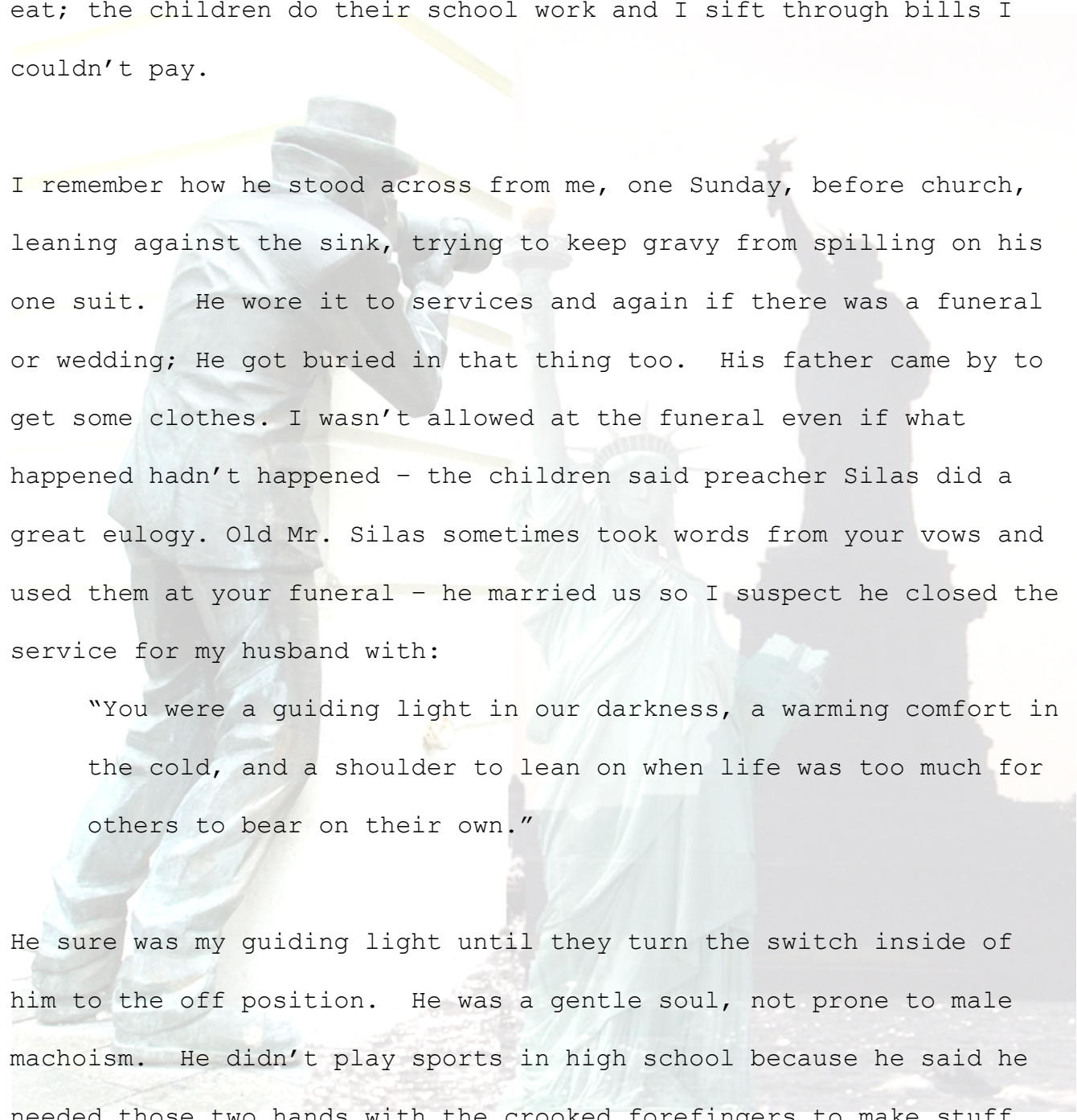


## **Spying on Embryos**



My name is Savannah Kerrielyn Ashurst, I'm twenty-six years old, and I live with my three children, Beau, Caroline and Paxton. I always thought that with any kind of luck, I would have been born an eagle, because I have the keenest sense of sight ever witness through steel, grey eyes, I can pick out a needle from across the room. But, I was made to be contented with being called a soothsayer. I have a great distaste for white cotton dresses, pigs and silence. I like my brother, Grayson, Doy Gordon, Juliette Hampton Morgan and Kaochlor, the lethal injection to intentionally end a life. To my family and everyone else in town, I am deceased, a rotting corpse left on the porch for buzzards. I would have stayed on that porch, too, with the holes so big, you could see right down to the earth, but the bank is about to take the home.

My little white house didn't have but three rooms. The porch is our den - our living space, except when it's too cold or too hot. I sleep in the living room; the children in the bedroom. Their space is divided by curtains momma sewed for them, when she was talking to me. Mr. Crenshaw put in a bathroom by the kitchen - well, he put up a piece of sheetrock to separate the place where we did our business from the one we eat in.



Since the incident, the children's father took his life - no, he didn't use no kind of injection; he did it with rope and a chair from the kitchen table. We only have three of them around where we eat; the children do their school work and I sift through bills I couldn't pay.

I remember how he stood across from me, one Sunday, before church, leaning against the sink, trying to keep gravy from spilling on his one suit. He wore it to services and again if there was a funeral or wedding; He got buried in that thing too. His father came by to get some clothes. I wasn't allowed at the funeral even if what happened hadn't happened - the children said preacher Silas did a great eulogy. Old Mr. Silas sometimes took words from your vows and used them at your funeral - he married us so I suspect he closed the service for my husband with:

"You were a guiding light in our darkness, a warming comfort in the cold, and a shoulder to lean on when life was too much for others to bear on their own."

He sure was my guiding light until they turn the switch inside of him to the off position. He was a gentle soul, not prone to male machoism. He didn't play sports in high school because he said he needed those two hands with the crooked forefingers to make stuff. Working over at the feed mill didn't give him much time to create

nothing - there was always an unfinished project out back in the shed.

I know just how it all played out, I'd been a witness to this kind of thing before: Mrs. Ella Jean Cornwell, the town-crier, would have told Mrs. Bernice Barnett, the busy body of everyone's business, that I had been seen parked near room six, at the River Boat Motel, on Route 74, at precisely ten minutes after one o'clock, on Tuesday, the eighth of July, 1961. Mrs. Bernice Barnett shore nough stated that that Tuesday was the one day that Lonnie Brown works a day shift. My own Mama, herself, scolded me:

"Now, let me tell you, Savannah Kerrilynn, Ella Jean Cornwell has the sharpest nose for detective work I ever seen, her life's mission has been to this town and its white residents, what reason she got to lie on you?"

After mama becomes convinced I was guilty, Ella Jean would have had substantiated proof to go that one step further:

"I'm putting two and two together and coming up with what nobody wants to believe, or, say out loud, Savannah Kerrielyn Ashurst, a married woman with two of the most beautiful white children, we could ever see, is having an affair with a colored fella, why else would she be at a motel ten minutes after one in the morning?"

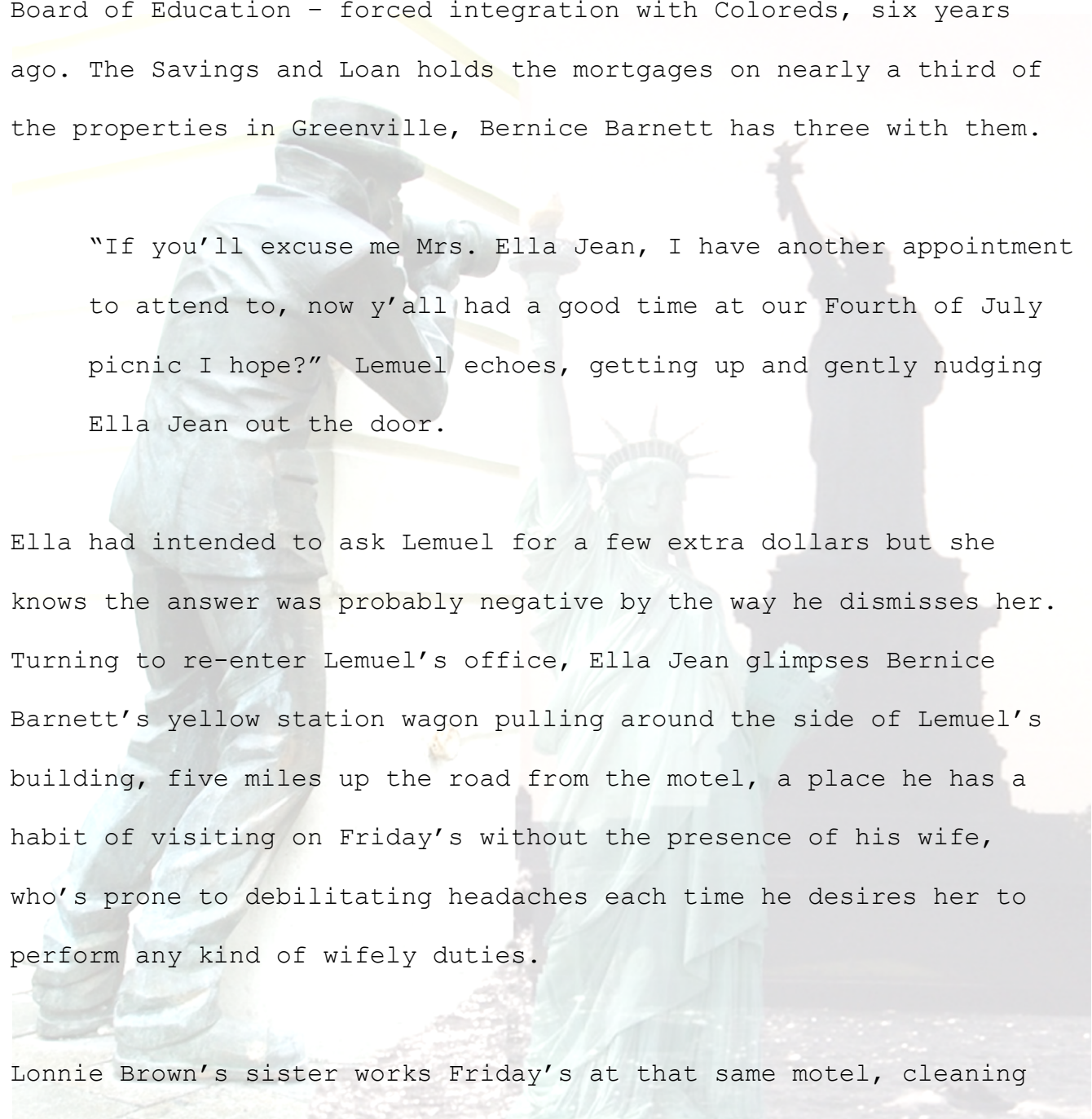
Ella Jean did so emphatically declare to Lemuel Blowhart, manager of the Greenville Savings and Loan, son of Imperial Wizard, Sean Blowhart, on a rainy afternoon, a few minutes before Lemuel pushed a standard check for one hundred fifty dollars, across his desk to her unmanicured hands that were gnawed from biting her nails to mask the deceit she loved to spread for money, but mostly because she, and, a number of individuals around the town were just plain greedy evil.

"I may've heard bout another white woman that Lonnie Brown might be causing shame," Ella Jean offered, her rapaciously bulging eyes landing on Lemuel's check writing hand.

Ella Jean needed hard cash, her husband was a gambler who drank too much before he placed bets on a hand that no card player this side of Mississippi would have played sober. Ella Jean signs the check and hands it right back to Lemuel, who folds it, shoving it in his right pant pocket.

"Ain't no other white woman got to worry, Lonnie Brown's been sacked." Lemuel officiates, picking a huge booger from his left nostril, rolling it around, then depositing it under his desk.

I can just see him now, right after his nose picking ritual, he'd open up his ledger, the record book where he keeps a column of the



ones who owed him money and the ones he paid for important information that would save our way of life in Mississippi after some communists in our very own government approved Brown versus the Board of Education - forced integration with Coloreds, six years ago. The Savings and Loan holds the mortgages on nearly a third of the properties in Greenville, Bernice Barnett has three with them.

"If you'll excuse me Mrs. Ella Jean, I have another appointment to attend to, now y'all had a good time at our Fourth of July picnic I hope?" Lemuel echoes, getting up and gently nudging Ella Jean out the door.

Ella had intended to ask Lemuel for a few extra dollars but she knows the answer was probably negative by the way he dismisses her. Turning to re-enter Lemuel's office, Ella Jean glimpses Bernice Barnett's yellow station wagon pulling around the side of Lemuel's building, five miles up the road from the motel, a place he has a habit of visiting on Friday's without the presence of his wife, who's prone to debilitating headaches each time he desires her to perform any kind of wifely duties.

Lonnie Brown's sister works Friday's at that same motel, cleaning rooms. Everyone on our side of town knows she's supposed to "clean" the room Lemuel occupies, the entire time he is at the motel. For Ella Jean to admit that truth about Lemuel, would be a conflict of

interest to her, Bernice Barnett and a lot of other empty pocketbooks.

"Mrs. Bernice Barnet, why you look brighter than the sun this cloudy day." Lemuel flatters, fingering the still warm check.

"I declare it rains every time I have news of important events." Bernice complains, with a soft chuckle.

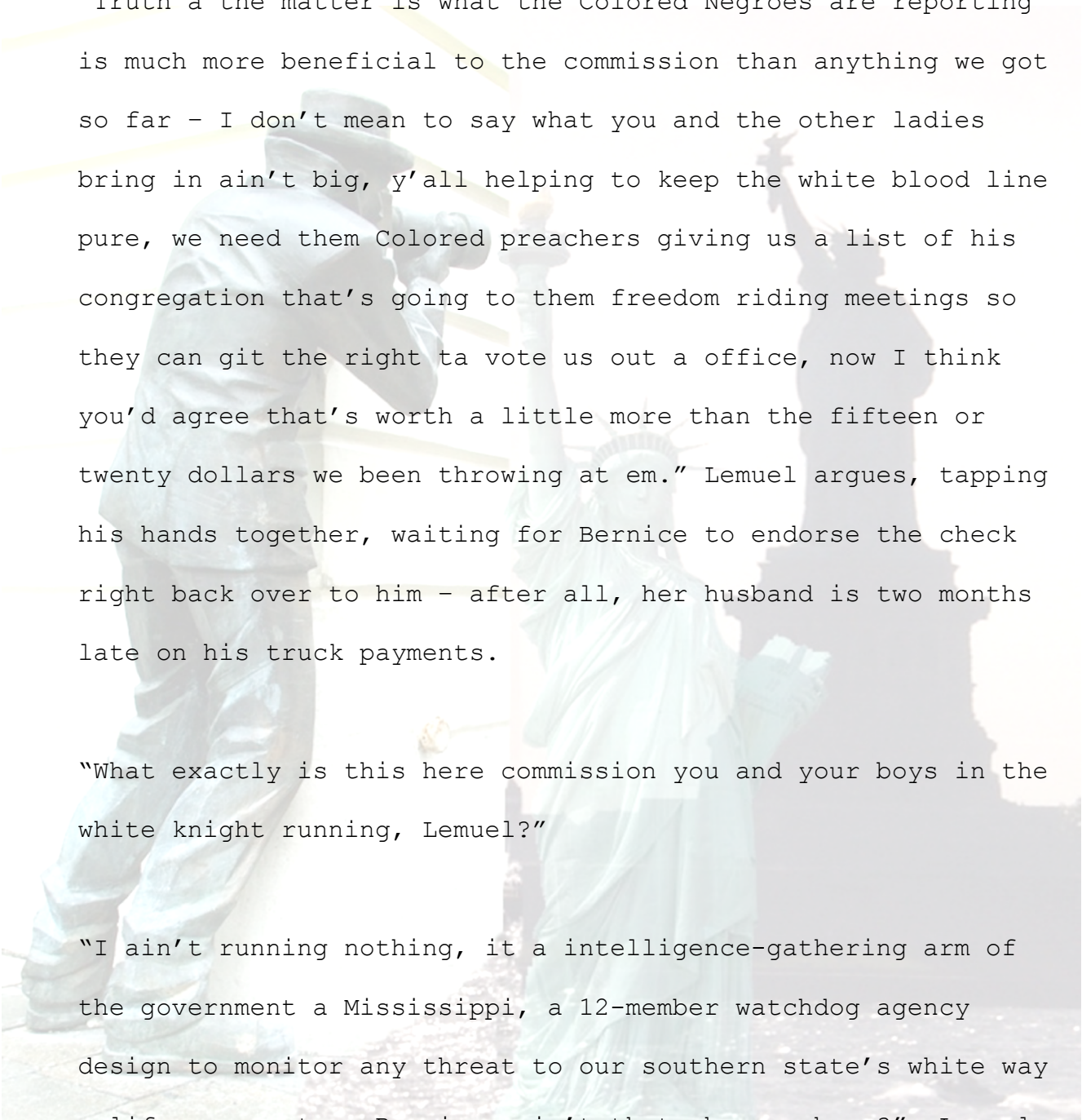
"You doing a fine service to the people of this here community and our country, Mrs. Barnett," Lemuel assures, sitting down, letting his right forefinger glide down along the columns to rest on her name.

He tears off a check from another book, handing it to her without looking up.

"This, this is significantly less than I'm expecting," Bernice objects, eyes clouding over with anxious fury.

"The commission been tight since they got so many of the Negro citizens on the payroll, now, you just hold your horses, things gonna go back to the way they was, your \$165 dollars, that is."

Lemuel soothes, rising, indicating he needs to get going.

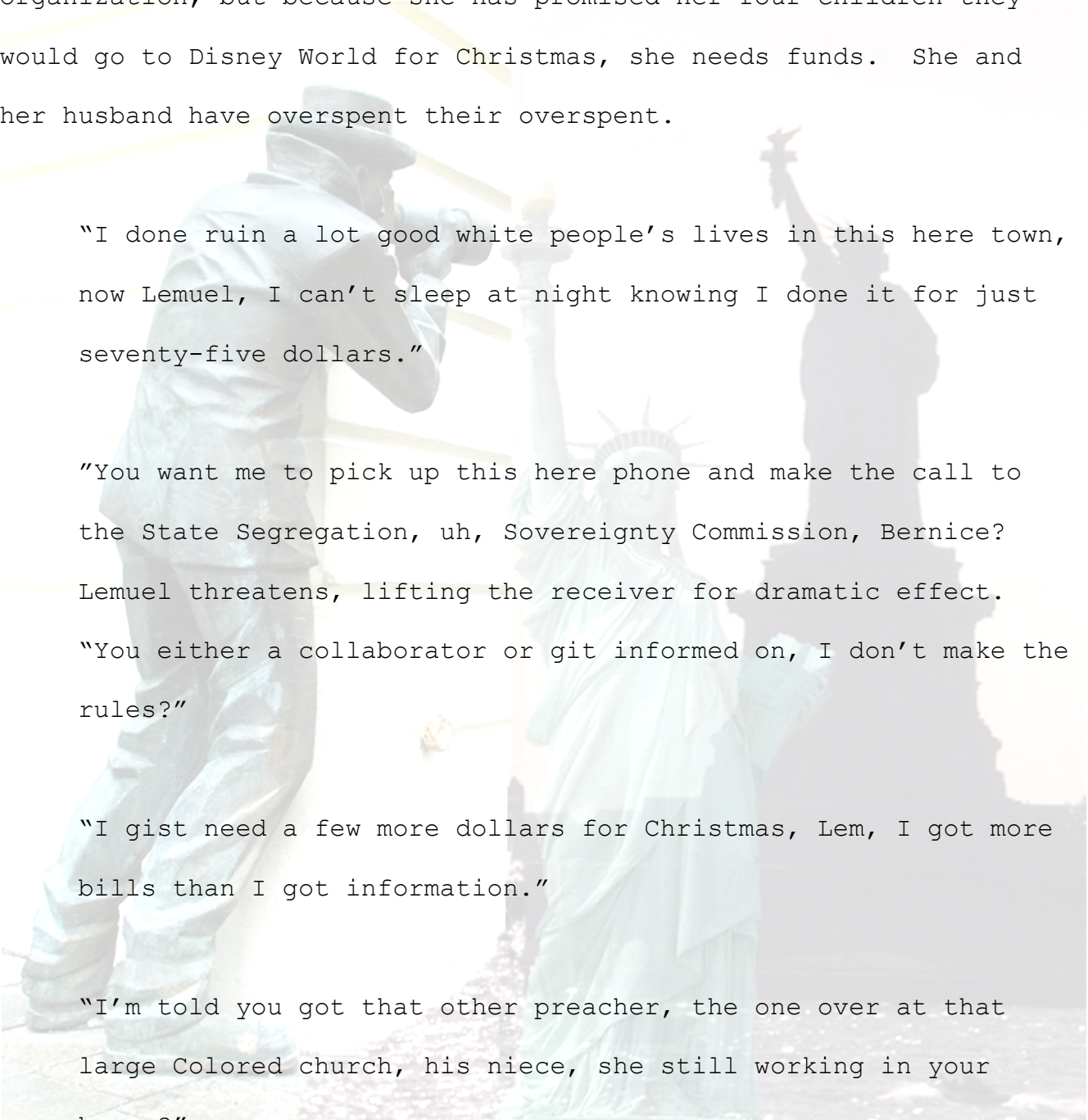


"Now don't you tell me y'all paying the Coloreds the same as the white folks are y'all?" Bernice objects.

"Truth a the matter is what the Colored Negroes are reporting is much more beneficial to the commission than anything we got so far - I don't mean to say what you and the other ladies bring in ain't big, y'all helping to keep the white blood line pure, we need them Colored preachers giving us a list of his congregation that's going to them freedom riding meetings so they can git the right ta vote us out a office, now I think you'd agree that's worth a little more than the fifteen or twenty dollars we been throwing at em." Lemuel argues, tapping his hands together, waiting for Bernice to endorse the check right back over to him - after all, her husband is two months late on his truck payments.

"What exactly is this here commission you and your boys in the white knight running, Lemuel?"

"I ain't running nothing, it a intelligence-gathering arm of the government a Mississippi, a 12-member watchdog agency design to monitor any threat to our southern state's white way a life, yourn too, Bernice, ain't that why you here?" Lemuel stares Bernice right between the eyes, trying to avoid them as much as possible.



Bernice isn't convinced, not simply because she isn't the sharpest tool in the shed and really can't conceive of such a state-run organization, but because she has promised her four children they would go to Disney World for Christmas, she needs funds. She and her husband have overspent their overspent.

"I done ruin a lot good white people's lives in this here town, now Lemuel, I can't sleep at night knowing I done it for just seventy-five dollars."

"You want me to pick up this here phone and make the call to the State Segregation, uh, Sovereignty Commission, Bernice? Lemuel threatens, lifting the receiver for dramatic effect.

"You either a collaborator or git informed on, I don't make the rules?"

"I gist need a few more dollars for Christmas, Lem, I got more bills than I got information."

"I'm told you got that other preacher, the one over at that large Colored church, his niece, she still working in your house?"

"I had to let her go." Bernice laments, lighting a cigarette.

"You git her to give some names, we'll pay for her to clean ya house, look after the children - I'll see that you git taken care of." Lemuel promises, gently pushing Bernice out the door.

Bernice Barnett leaves unsatisfied, but she makes up for her disappointment with Lemuel by telling mama that she's concerned for the safety of our family if I don't make some drastic changes. I had no idea what that would be, I'm six months pregnant. I am now alone, broke and have two mouths I can barely feed - make that three. All the family I know lives right here in Greenville; where am I supposed to go and with what money? My husband's insurance policy has been contested, the carrier says it has a policy about taking your own life - they are refusing to pay.

My brother Grayson sneaked over to the house late the other night and gave me enough money to tide us over for a few months. He said he couldn't be seen over here in the daylight. We are going to be a month behind, soon, on the mortgage payments to Lemuel's Savings and Loan.

It's a chilly Tuesday morning, two and a half months later, I have been sleeping on the large swing on the porch - it's the only place I could rest my huge belly. I told my oldest to go and get the

Colored midwife, the baby is coming earlier than expected. The midwife isn't happy to come to my house - it has been outlawed - like someone has painted an invisible "X" on the front door.

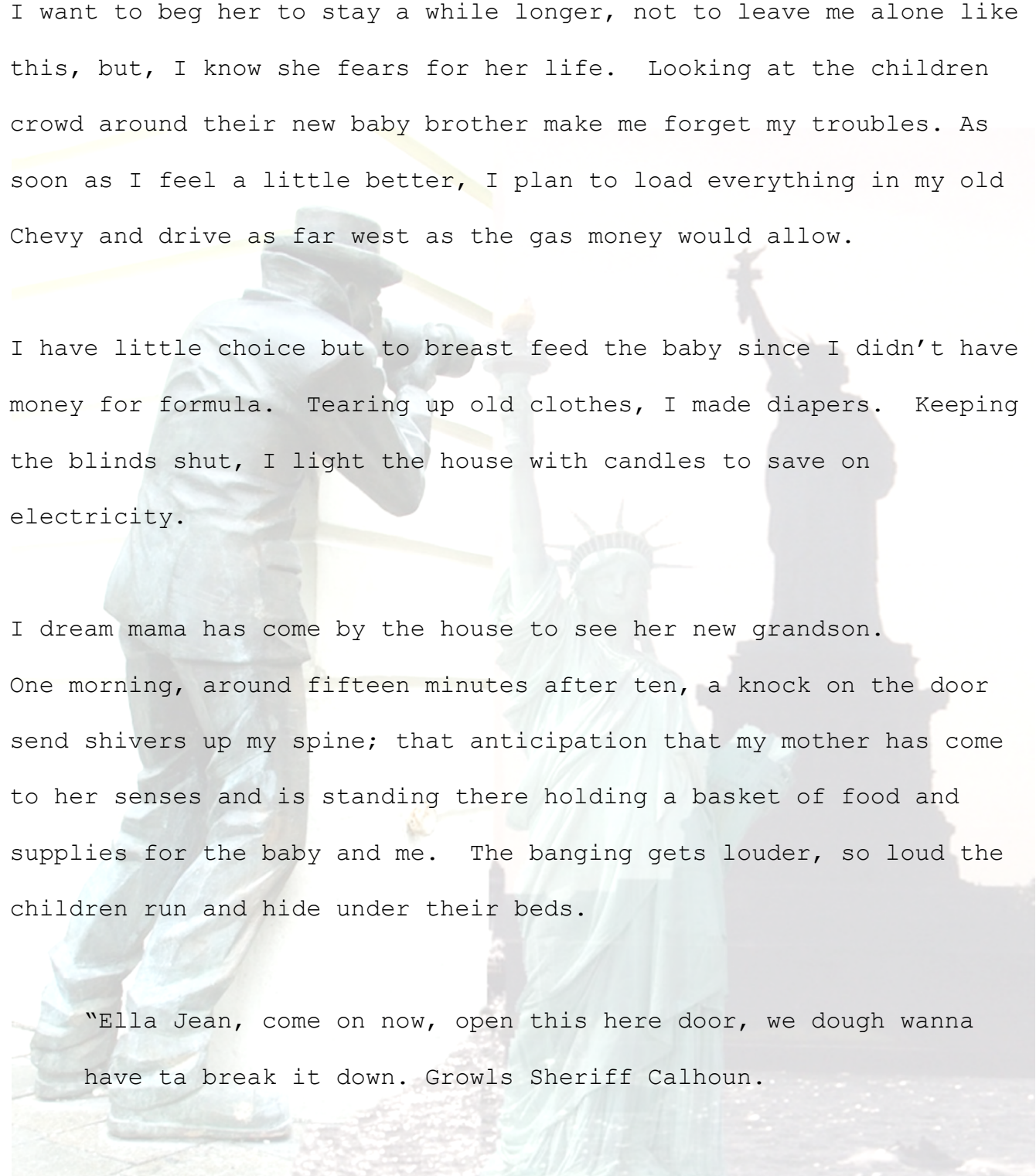
"Ms. Ella Jean, I think you need to go to the hospital, I ain't too experience with delivering white babies this early" she lies, looking away.

She has delivered more babies than any doctor in any hospital in this state, Colored and white - late, on time and early.

"You my only hope, I know you can do this," I scream, between contractions and the pure misery of despondency and depression.

I must have passed out because when I awoke, I am holding a sweet little boy in my bosom. I name him Paxton, my brother's middle name.

The midwife has cleaned my house and fed my children. I give her some of the emergency money in my jar from the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet. She looks down at the bundle of wrinkled fifty, one-dollar bills with the same pity she gives me. She puts the stack back in it before returning the jar to the cupboard - tip-toeing out the back door, into the thicket of trees, heading through the back roads so nobody would see her.



I want to beg her to stay a while longer, not to leave me alone like this, but, I know she fears for her life. Looking at the children crowd around their new baby brother make me forget my troubles. As soon as I feel a little better, I plan to load everything in my old Chevy and drive as far west as the gas money would allow.

I have little choice but to breast feed the baby since I didn't have money for formula. Tearing up old clothes, I made diapers. Keeping the blinds shut, I light the house with candles to save on electricity.

I dream mama has come by the house to see her new grandson. One morning, around fifteen minutes after ten, a knock on the door send shivers up my spine; that anticipation that my mother has come to her senses and is standing there holding a basket of food and supplies for the baby and me. The banging gets louder, so loud the children run and hide under their beds.

"Ella Jean, come on now, open this here door, we dough wanna have ta break it down. Growls Sheriff Calhoun.

"Let us help you help ya self, now Ella Jean, we know you're going through a tough time, ya scared," coaxes Mrs. Betty Flum,

the head of child services, with deceit dripping from her every word.

I drag myself to the door, removing the wood barrier, the padlock and the little latch that acts like a deadbolt.

"What's the problem, why y'all at my house so early in the morning, I ain't call no one to come out?" I demand, thinking they probably had been told some other malicious gossip about my children going hungry.

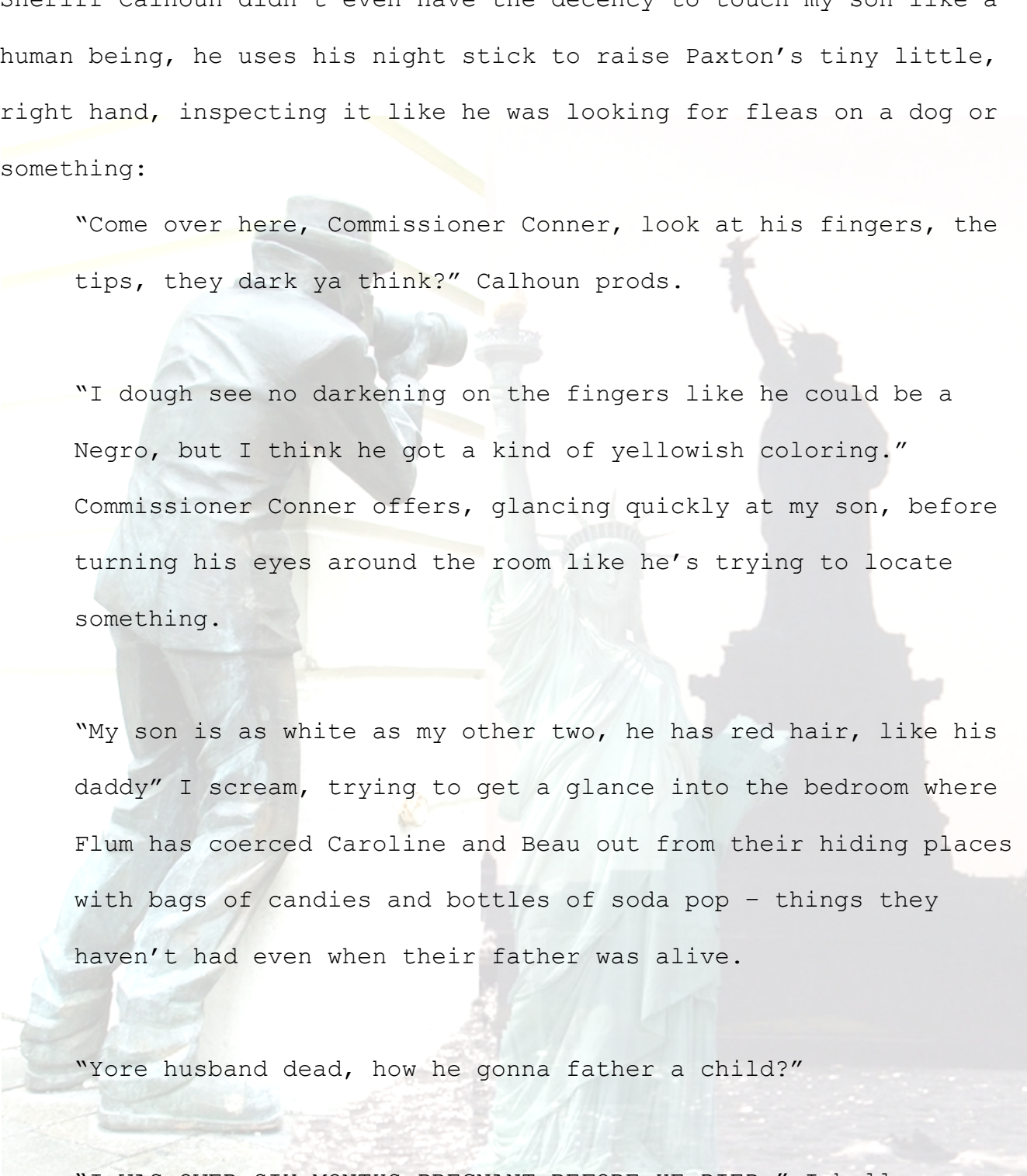
Sheriff Calhoun struts into my house like he owns it, followed by Commissioner Conner and Mrs. Flum.

"Where's the little bastard, Ella Jean?"

Before I could answer, Flum had made her way over to the wooden box I was using for a basinet. She pulls away the blanket like my son was diseased or something.

"Is it colored?" Demands Sheriff Calhoun.

"I don't know, I'm here for another reason, this your job," objects Mrs. Flum, straightening up, turning to enter the bedroom in search of Beau and Caroline.



Sheriff Calhoun didn't even have the decency to touch my son like a human being, he uses his night stick to raise Paxton's tiny little, right hand, inspecting it like he was looking for fleas on a dog or something:

"Come over here, Commissioner Conner, look at his fingers, the tips, they dark ya think?" Calhoun prods.

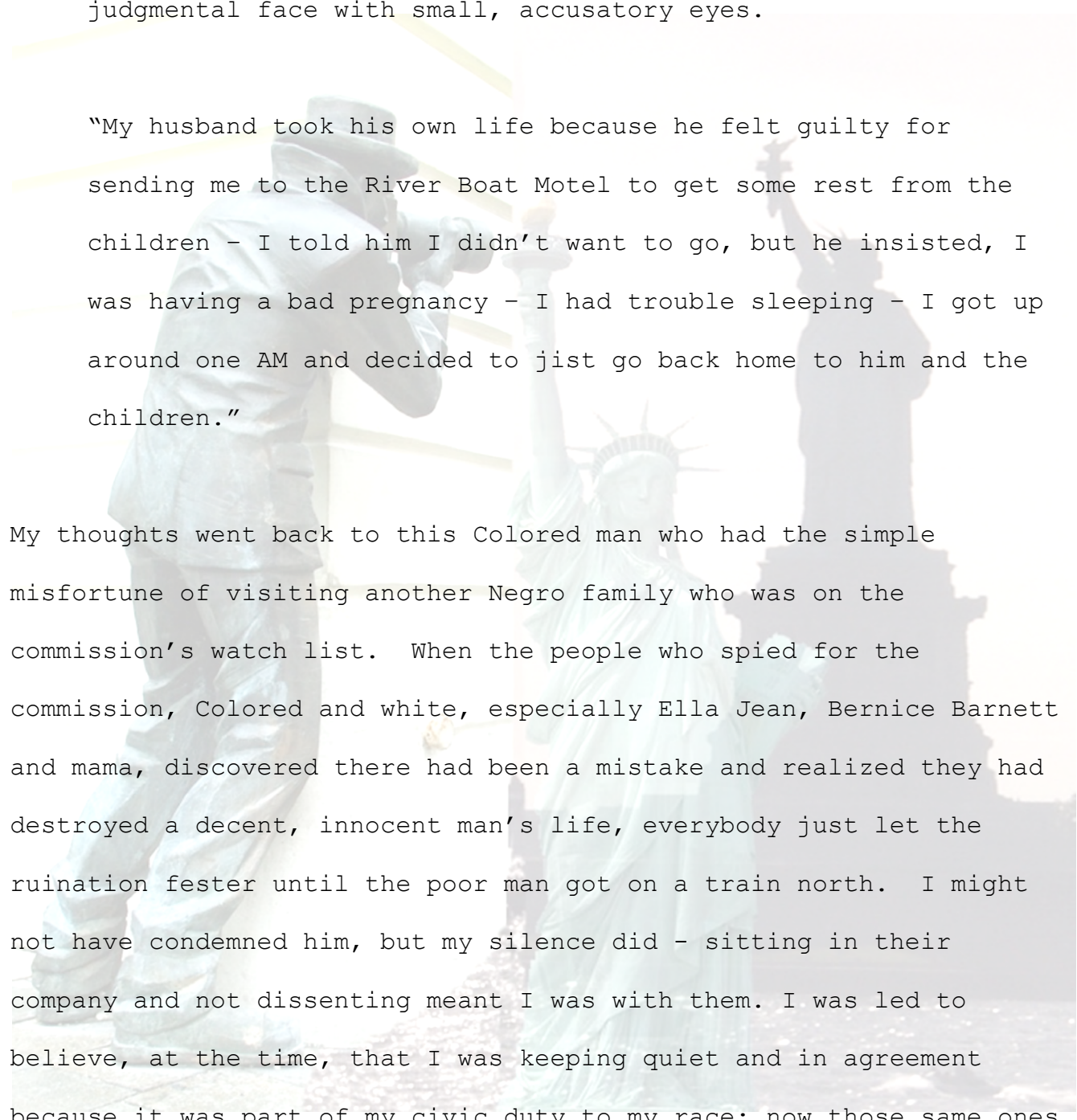
"I dough see no darkening on the fingers like he could be a Negro, but I think he got a kind of yellowish coloring."

Commissioner Conner offers, glancing quickly at my son, before turning his eyes around the room like he's trying to locate something.

"My son is as white as my other two, he has red hair, like his daddy" I scream, trying to get a glance into the bedroom where Flum has coerced Caroline and Beau out from their hiding places with bags of candies and bottles of soda pop - things they haven't had even when their father was alive.

"Yore husband dead, how he gonna father a child?"

"I WAS OVER SIX MONTHS PREGNANT BEFORE HE DIED." I bellow through clenched teeth.



"He killed hisself cause he found out you was pregnant by that Negro, Lonnie Brown." Commissioner Conner snarls, taking his glasses off, cleaning them, then returning them to a round, judgmental face with small, accusatory eyes.

"My husband took his own life because he felt guilty for sending me to the River Boat Motel to get some rest from the children - I told him I didn't want to go, but he insisted, I was having a bad pregnancy - I had trouble sleeping - I got up around one AM and decided to jist go back home to him and the children."

My thoughts went back to this Colored man who had the simple misfortune of visiting another Negro family who was on the commission's watch list. When the people who spied for the commission, Colored and white, especially Ella Jean, Bernice Barnett and mama, discovered there had been a mistake and realized they had destroyed a decent, innocent man's life, everybody just let the ruination fester until the poor man got on a train north. I might not have condemned him, but my silence did - sitting in their company and not dissenting meant I was with them. I was led to believe, at the time, that I was keeping quiet and in agreement because it was part of my civic duty to my race; now those same ones have come after me.

"Get away from my children, get out of my house, leave us alone." I screech through a mucus covered mouth, quivering with rage under the weight of helplessness.

Sheriff Calhoun blocks me as Flum ushers my children out the door to the still running police car. The children keep trying to look back at their baby brother, at me, but Flum turns their heads away. My decimation is already in force - I am about to head west without the only things I had left - that I care about - my children.

"Please, please don't take my children from me, they all I got, I'm begging you, please, the little one's just a infant?" I grovel, wiping snot from my face with the back of my trembling hands. "Beau! Caroline!"

"we ain't taking them all, jist the two white ones." Spits Commissioner Conner, lighting a cigarette, drawing a long hard puff, flickering ashes in my son's frightened, little face.

