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## Voicemail #1: To Madam C.J. Walker

Taylor Byas

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## voicemail #1: to Madam C.J. Walker

Taylor Byas

Sorry to call so late, but I thought of you the other day, your history-book picture stamped into my dream like a president's face on a twenty and I had to hit you up. Just talk to you. I've been thinking about your hands, how they were primed for kinks and curls

since childhood, pricked by the fang-curl of the cotton bracts. How this gifted you a love of softness, of running a hand through cotton pressed to silk. I can picture your first pass with the hot comb, its hiss-talk as it steamed through hair and grease, and your face

at the curls' sulfur-cook. And you, tilting the client's face this way and that in the mirror, their curls stretched and simmered into submission. Talk about magic. I must confess, I thought you were the one who invented the hot-comb. Your picture next to a short paragraph on my U.S. history hand-

out for Black History Month, your life in shorthand to keep us black girls from hoping. Let's face it, the history books are another slavery. No pictures of black children smiling, no girls playing in their curls or boys caressing the parentheses of their afros. Even you, your hair glassed with sheen spray, bone-straight. No talk

of your money, your millions, your mansion. No talk of being self-made, no family fortune handed down. No talk of you really living. The books say you worked in the cotton fields like your parents, your face deepened by the sun, your 7-year-old feet curling a path through the stalks. The book has your picture

only a few pages of away from slavery, another picture of bodies pencil-shaded black, and the quick talk of a whip on their backs. And the scars, never curled or bent but always drawn as X's by an artist's hand And I wish you could have seen my face when I saw those bloodied backs so close to you

in the book, as if it were all the same. As if the hand that straightened your curls was the same hand to whip you. Talk to you soon. Try to picture my face.