

EXCERPT FROM THE SHORT STORY

KISWANA BROWNE

BY GLORIA NAYLOR

Note:

Kiswana Browne has chosen to live in her own apartment at Brewster Place, a derelict urban area mainly inhabited by African Americans. The story is set in the early 1980s, when many young African Americans wanted to stress their African roots.

From the window of her sixth-floor studio apartment, Kiswana could see over the wall at the end of the street to the busy avenue that lay just north of Brewster Place. The late afternoon shoppers looked like brightly clad marionettes as they moved between the congested traffic, clutching their
5 packages against their bodies [...].

And her mind was busy again, creating flames and smoke and frustrated tenants whose escape was being hindered because they were slipping and sliding in pigeon shit. She watched their cussing, haphazard descent on the fire escapes until they had all reached the bottom. They were milling
10 around, oblivious for their burning apartments, angrily planning to march on the mayor's office about the pigeons. She materialized placards and banners for them, and they just reached the corner, boldly sidestepping fire hoses and broken glass, when they all vanished.

A tall copper-skinned woman had met this phantom parade at the corner,
15 and they had dissolved in front of her long confident strides. She plowed through the remains of their faded mists, unconscious of the lingering wisps of their presence on her leather bag and black fur-trimmed coat. It took a few seconds for this transfer from one realm to another to reach Kiswana, but then suddenly she recognized the woman.

20 "O, God, it's Mama!" She looked down guiltily at the forgotten newspaper in her lap and hurriedly circled random job advertisements.
[...]

When she heard the first two short raps on the door, her eyes took a final flight over the small apartment, desperately seeking out any slight
25 misdemeanor that might have to be defended. Well, there was nothing she could do about the crack in the wall over the table. She had been after the landlord to fix it for two months now. And there had been no time to sweep the rug, and everyone knew that off-gray always looked dirtier

than it really was. And it was just too damn bad about the kitchen. How
 30 was she expected to be out job hunting every day and still have time to
 keep a kitchen that looked like her mother's, who didn't even work and
 still had someone come in twice a month for general cleaning. And
 besides ...

Her imaginary argument was abruptly interrupted by a second series of
 35 knocks, accompanied by a penetrating, "Melanie, Melanie, are you there?"

Kiswana strode toward the door. She's starting before she even gets in
 here. She knows that's not my name anymore.

She swung the door open to face her slightly flushed mother. "Oh, hi,
 Mama. You know, I thought I heard a knock, but I figured it was for the
 40 people next door, since no one hardly ever calls me Melanie." Score one
 for me, she thought.

"Well, it's awfully strange you can forget a name you answered to for
 twenty-three years," Mrs. Browne said, as she moved past Kiswana into
 the apartment. "My, that was a long climb. How long has your elevator
 45 been out? Honey, how do you manage with your laundry and groceries
 up all those steps? But I guess you're young, and it wouldn't bother you
 as much as it does me." This long string of questions told Kiswana that
 her mother had no intentions of beginning her visit with another
 argument about her new African name.

50 "You know I would have called before I came, but you don't have a phone
 yet. I didn't want you to feel that I was snooping. As a matter of fact, I
 didn't expect to find you home at all. I thought you'd be out looking for a
 job." Mrs. Browne had mentally covered the entire apartment while she
 was talking and taking off her coat.

55 "Well I got up late this morning. I thought I'd buy the afternoon paper
 and start early tomorrow."

"That sounds like a good idea." Her mother moved toward the window
 and picked up the discarded paper and glanced over the hurriedly circled
 ads. "Since when do you have experience as a forklift operator?"

60 Kiswana caught her breath and silently cursed herself for her stupidity.
 "Oh, my hand slipped – I meant to circle file clerk." She quickly took the
 paper before her mother could see that she had also marked cutlery
 salesman and chauffeur.

“You’re sure you weren’t sitting here moping and daydreaming again?”
 65 Amber specks of laughter flashed in the corner of Mrs. Browne’s eyes.
 Kiswana threw her shoulders back and unsuccessfully tried to disguise
 her embarrassment with indignation.
 “Oh, God, Mama! I haven’t done that in years – it’s for kids. When are you
 going to realize that I’m a woman now?” She sought desperately for some
 70 womanly thing to do and settled for throwing herself on the couch and
 crossing her legs in what she hoped looked like a nonchalant arc.
 “Please, have a seat,” she said, attempting the same tones and gestures
 she’d seen Bette Davis use on the late movies.
 Mrs. Browne, lowering her eyes to hide her amusement, accepted the
 75 invitation and sat at the window, also crossing her legs. [...]
 “At least you have a halfway decent view from here. I was wondering
 what lay beyond that dreadful wall – it’s the boulevard. Honey, did you
 know that you can see the trees in Linden Hills from here?”
 Kiswana knew that very well, because there were many lonely days that
 80 she would sit in her gray apartment and stare at those trees and think of
 home, but she would rather have choked than admit that to her mother.
 “Oh, really, I never noticed. So how is Daddy and things at home?” [...]

Source:

Naylor, Gloria. *Kiswana Browne*, in: Oates, Joyce Carol & Berliner, Janet. *Snapshots – Mothers and daughters*, Vintage London, 2001, 134-138.

Annotations:

- l. 8 haphazard – having no plan/order
- l. 17 wisp – think streak of smoke, mist, etc
- l. 21 random – chosen, done, etc, without a particular plan or pattern
- l. 28 off-gray – shade of light gray
- l. 61 file clerk – office assistant
- l. 73 Bette Davis – American actress (1908-1989)
- l. 78 Linden Hills – prosperous neighborhood where Kiswana’s parents live