

AALIYAH
by Gabrielle Saffell

Afraid, but not alone in a metropolis filled with tourists, walking down the cement paved streets. Aaliyah smells the damp concrete beneath her hurried feet, stuffed inside of the tight flats as drizzles of rain hit her face. Dark shadows of the past follow as a black cloud above her. Annoyed by the sores building on her baby toes from the tight flats she has grown out of but, had to throw on quickly before taking off. The looks and stares of strangers, Aaliyah refrains to look in them in eyes for fear of recognition from church members. She knows this is no place for a 17-year-old to be alone as she cringes from the touch of a dried callous filled hand cupping hers. She snatches her hand away as the smell of rotting liquor and cheap cologne engross the unkempt-suited man who takes advantage of a moment, she must share the sidewalk with him and tourists. Aaliyah grows tired and feels lightheaded as hunger pangs strike. Aaliyah notices a younger teen up the block going back and forth across the street. He runs from a tent near an alley way to what appears to be separate tents of homeless people. Aaliyah remembered visiting this place before but is comfortable at the thought of her foster parents who hate the inner-city because they thought people like this are beneath them. They were reminded of where they come from. They punished her with beatings not to spare the rod about hanging out with other teens they consider sinners who must not believe in Jesus. If they did, they and their families would not be in such a predicament. Aaliyah slips into the Bodega with the hopes she has enough change stolen from the Sunday school tithing basket. She sees so many of her favorite snack cakes, crackers, and cookies. Not to mention the sodas and juices that could quench the dried goods as she swallows them. The Storekeeper

notices the teen who's trying to blend in but cute as a button, as she reminds him of his 16-year-old daughter and her friend's hair that couldn't look terrible no matter how messy the up-do bun.

"There's a whole rack of grab bags over there if you need one," says Storekeeper.

"Thank you," replies Aaliyah. Looking at him from the corner of her eyes from shame. Mason walks into the Bodega and takes one bag from the bottom shelf moving around the tall adults who were shopping. Aaliyah noticed the 14-year-old bob and weave, returning to steal another bag. "Put it back," says Aaliyah.

"Mind your business little girl" replies Mason. He noticed her turn toward the Storekeeper.

"OK, I'll put it back tattle-tale" says Mason. Before he heads midway to escape, Aaliyah snatches two more bags and chases after him. "Wait, wait, here are two more," said Aaliyah.

Mason stares.

"What did you do that for?" says Mason.

"I figured you could use some more" replies Aaliyah. Mason rolls his eyes and throws his hand down in disappointment. His hair disheveled and dirty but innocent huffy cheeks "I-I" says Mason as Aaliyah stops him before he could say anything else. "If I could just campout with you," Mason interrupted,

"It's all boys, no girls" replies Mason.

"I just ran away from a home with all boys," replies Aaliyah. Mason scratches his head.

"One night is all I need" says Aaliyah. Mason signals her to follow as Aaliyah struggles to hold the brown paper sacks of food. Mason gives pause for Aaliyah to wait as he enters the tent that could sleep six men. Sam comes out to check her out. He looks her up and down with those natural lashes of his with a curly afro tapered on the sides and back with a close cut. "I guess she

can stay just one night” says Sam. Aaliyah follows him into the tent and drops the food to the ground once inside. Aaliyah nods to another kid (Damon), 15. “You can cop that spot over there” says Mason pointing to an empty space by the exit. “I really appreciate this” says Aaliyah. “You can grab a blanket from my bag over there” replies Sam. Aaliyah starts to feel at home as she digs past a bunch of sweat clothes. Aaliyah stops in her tracks; she stares long and hard at the feminine hygienic products she sees at the bottom of the bag. Aaliyah and Sam make eye contact at the same time. Aaliyah slowly releases her stare to put clothes back over the evidence.

“END”