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Hear Them

1819. An African American man is unable to take three steps on foreign soil before he is sold to a rich, white, plantation owner in Georgia. Throughout his life in “The Freedom Land,” he is anything but free. He toils from dusk to dawn, collecting cotton beneath the blistering sun and praying there’s a God up there that sees the world devoid of color—skin color, that is—and will grace his suffering with a smidge of joy. His wishes are heard, and life blesses him with a beautiful wife and a doe-eyed daughter. He thinks to himself, *I’m richer than any free man could ever be. What more could I need?* Alas, this happiness doesn’t last long. The plantation owner (or now, “Master”) rapes the man’s wife, and threatens to kill her if she ever even looked at her husband again. Master refuses to provide alcohol to sanitize a gash on his baby’s leg, and the infection in her blood takes her life in the same year his wife is taken. Reflecting, the black man thinks: *Why is it the color of my skin, and not the man within, that defines my place in this damned country? My Lord, where has my justice gone?* Only this time, the man’s prayers would be heard 46 years later.

1919. An Italian seamstress has been working at a clothing for five years and counting. She lives in a tenement nearby, speaking solely Sicilian to her circle of sisters—girls she has stayed with since she arrived on Ellis Island. She heard from one of them that the Great War is finally over. This Italian lady diligently sews to meet her quota, hemming shirt collars one after another, scars of carelessness on the hands of a working woman. The boss of the factory is like any other of the time, greedy for wealth. Anything for profit, at the price of the lives of these young women who make 20 cents an hour, anxious to not lose their job. Being an experienced seamstress comes in handy for a lady like her; the boss keeps her there for the money. Or, that’s what she thought at least. It isn’t until the boss heard her talking to her sisters, chatting about how she adores the community they’ve built. But as “la comunità,” leaves her lips, the boss reaches to grab her and calls the authorities in a mad rush. Who would have guessed that “la comunità” could be interpreted as “communist?” Officers drag the immigrant seamstress out, unable to understand her words through her wails. She listens to their words, though, and with her minimal English hears “blacklisted,” “communist,” and “Red Scare.” *It was just a normal day,* she thinks, *a normal day with my family. Why me? Was it “la comunità?” Maybe? I don’t know. I’m more or less dead now, and it’s all because Boss didn’t know a word of Sicilian. O heavenly father, I ask you to hear my prayer. Please spare me justice in this life, for I have none.* Her prayer was heard two years too late.

2019. A new Indian student takes her first steps in the hallways of the high school, bright and eager for a new start, a new life. Her eyes wander the walls, and her feet keep pace with the others. She looks to incite conversation with any willing person, but when she does spark one, her determination is diminished by disdain. “What did you say? I can’t understand you! Do you even know English?” exclaims the girl, ignorant of culture, ignorant of feelings—*ignorant*. The girl, along with everyone else in sight, laugh; giggles resonate off the lockers, pointing fingers calling attention to “the new girl that can’t speak right.” Traumatized from her last school and now this one, the Indian girl tears up, keeps her head down, and hurries off to homeroom. Sitting in the desk by the window, she wonders to herself; *What did I do wrong? I know my English isn’t perfect but have they never heard an Indian accent before? I just wanted to escape my old life, but I guess it doesn’t matter where I go… it’s all the same. My accent defines who I am in this world before I can define myself. Help me please, whoever is there… help me find my justice.*

Alexander Hamilton once said, “I think the first duty of society is justice.” What I say is, “What if the first duty of society wasn’t justice?” From the past 200 years to present day in United States’ history, many different people in our societies have lived a life without justice. They’ve learned to set their expectations low, because even then they overestimate the value of their own lives. Fortunately, our society is becoming self-aware of the effects of groundless judgement and discrimination. It improves as time ticks on, with the judicial and legislative branches of our government utilizing their federal power to equalize the value of lives under the law and people “[trusting] thyself,” as Ralph Waldo Emerson would say, finding confidence within themselves to speak what they believe.

“Hey are you okay? I saw what happened outside, and that was totally not cool of them. You probably only know English as a second language, like me. But enough of that, hi! My name is Vidya! Are you new here? I can show you around if you want later, just let me know!”

I can say with certainty that Hamilton’s words are coming to life to this day. The people aware of society’s first duty become the justice others need to stand on their own.