Dear PopPop,

Do you remember Christmas Eve, 2015? Everyone else was upstairs getting ready for dinner, but you and I were in the family room. I was on my laptop, the one you had given me, and you were watching the news. It was something about the 2016 election which wouldn't come for almost a year, and the reporters were talking about Donald Trump. You turned to me, and you said, "I would rather die of cancer than see that man elected president." A few weeks later, your lung cancer relapsed. A month later, I woke up and was told that I was headed to Fredericksburg. No one said why, but I knew immediately that you were no longer with us. But I don't think I fully realized then what was to come…

Nine months later, Donald Trump was elected President. I don't think any of us got any sleep that night. We knew it was going to be bad, but none of us could have predicted how bad.

I knew back then, but now…now, I fully realize why you had feared Trump's candidacy to the proportion that you did. In his speeches, you heard the words you grew up surrounded by. You saw Bull Connor, Strom Thurmond, and Mills Godwin up on the debate stage behind the podium when he spoke. You saw the same jeering white faces of the racists from 50s and 60s reflected in the faces of the supporters at Trump's rallies. In 2016.

You had spent your adult life convincing yourself that things had changed, at least enough. That we had made progress and the country was different from when you had grown up and that we were never going back – but when you saw the possibility of the country you had served overseas and at home electing a man who spewed the same bile that you grew up in, it was a horrifying wake up call. I understood your words and why you said them, but I didn't grasp the depth or the urgency then.

Mom said that, before I was born, you used to argue that things were pretty good. Not perfect, but better. And that it wasn't a good idea to rock the boat. That changed after you had grandchildren. You looked at where we were as a country and decided it wasn't good enough after all. Not for your grandkids.

Honestly, I have a hard time even picturing you saying not to rock the boat. I remember your political and community involvement and your quiet activism. That's what I remember of you; that's the man I knew as my grandfather. You helped to push me toward the work I am doing today, working for candidates who will help people like us, fighting for students the same way you did when you were on the school board. The work you did, the way you inspired me – it's part of your legacy – and I hope it continues through the work that I do during my life.

After the work you did, I don't think you believed we would actually elect someone like Trump.

I think you still had faith in our nation – faith that we would not go back, faith that when we said "never again" we meant it, faith that a man so vile would never become our leader (not again)…a faith that I lost on election night.

Nothing I've learned since then has done anything to restore my faith to any degree. I remember the stories you told me about when you were young, and I don't think, after all, that we've come very far. I've studied the history that was absent from our textbooks, the stuff that your family went through, what happened to your cousins when they fought to desegregate Virginia's public schools, the threats our family received when Mom and Dad decided to get married as an interracial couple. I had a lot of time to do that. I left the school system to homeschool a month after you died. And I had opportunities to study and research

and to meet people I never would have if I had stayed in school. What I learned in the last few years is that the faith you had in this country was misplaced.

But maybe you realized that, and, in the end, that's what killed you – the loss of a faith that had kept you fueled through your struggle. It was not only the struggle with cancer but the struggle of being a Black man in a nation that did not value your life, despite your service as a member of its armed forces or as an elected official. Maybe at that point, you were too exhausted. Maybe you could see another fight coming, but you knew then that it wasn't your fight – that your time had passed and my time had come. This fight…was mine.

When you were growing up, the world looked like a different place than it did when you left it. There were no cell phones, no computers, no internet. When you were growing up, racists were pretty comfortable being racist. It was publicly acceptable. I'm learning that the world is not much different than the one we live in now.

Before you died, public racism wasn't socially acceptable. Racists weren't comfortable being racist. The Klan had devolved into a joke and, like other hate groups, had been driven largely out of sight. That has now changed.

Spike Lee won an Oscar – finally – for a movie about a Black man who infiltrated the Ku Klux Klan in the 1970s. At the end of the movie, the scene cut from the fire of a burning cross to the fire of a burning torch in Charlottesville in 2017. The torches were held by white men, most of them wearing khakis and polo shirts, and no hoods. Bull Connor is president, and racists are no longer uncomfortable being racist. They never really went away. But now, the internet has given them a tool to network and organize. Seeing a presidential candidate rise to power using thinly-veiled bigoted language and surrounding himself with a staff that

didn't even bother masking their white supremacy created a climate that allows bigots to feel safe. White supremacists are running for office. And they are getting elected.

The sad reality is that we did not grow up in two different worlds. We may have grown up sixty years apart, but it is still the same world. We are just two poor Black kids from the South, dreaming of a better tomorrow.

After the 2016 election, I didn't know what to do. So I emailed another poor Black kid from the south…Congressman John Lewis. He's one of the people I got to meet because I left the public school system. In your time, he was a Civil Rights leader; in my time, he's an icon. But he hasn't forgotten when he came from, and when it comes down to it, he's just like us. About two months later, he wrote me back, and he told me to come meet with him in DC. He sat me down in his office on Capitol Hill, and he told me that the fight was still going on. Just as I've learned myself, he told me that things weren't much different, and he, too, drew a comparison between Bull Connor (a man he personally went toe-to-toe with) and the man who now sits in the White House.

When you were here, we thought the racial divide in America was a sickness, and the path to a cure seemed difficult but not impossible – and I think a lot of people still believe that. But since then, I have come to realize that it is not a sickness that is slowly killing America, but a vital organ keeping it alive. It's a part of who we are, built into the foundations of our nation's institutions; we have never existed without it. People are not willing to work for change because – in reality – they do not actually want anything to change. White privilege is a great thing if you're someone who benefits from it. You and I just weren't so lucky. Why would someone want to change a world that puts them ahead just because they're a different race than us? I'm starting to realize that the reason things haven't changed isn't

because, as white people often like to say, our country isn't ready for that kind of change, but because nobody has ever really wanted that change – not a single U.S. President that you saw in your time and likely not a single one that I will see in mine.

But if this divide is so ingrained in our nation's past and present, if it was built into the foundations of our nation's institutions, if people are not willing to confront it and do the work that needs to be done to eliminate it, and it hasn't weakened with time over more than sixty years, will we ever see a day when it is gone?

Sincerely,

Your grandson,

Langston Carter