

LOSING NINETEEN

BY JUDGE LYNN C. TOLER

I lost Nineteen again today. Abandoning himself to that wasteland we offhandedly call 'the system', he just walked away - casually - like it was no big deal. Some claim I shouldn't say I lost him, though, considering what I do. While I am a Black woman, I am also the person appointed to balance the books, which means, that, on this particular day, I am the one sending Nineteen to jail.

I am a judge in an inner-ring suburb, a place where middle-class stability stands in the shadow of urban distractions. Here, Black, male and Nineteen is required to face the same dilemma every day; "Do I work and wait like momma said, or join the party down the street?" Forced to choose before the calm sets in, Nineteen picks the wrong one. Next thing you know, he's standing before me, wondering what all the fuss is about.

It's important to know that I am a municipal judge. Handling minor matters, I deal with assault, drug possession and carrying a concealed weapon charges. Unfortunately, the size of the cases I see occasionally confuses Nineteen. He views his mistake as a little thing that doesn't warrant much concern. I, on the other hand, see it as a small down payment on an incredible cultural cost.

"What's with making me look for a job?" he asks. "Why do I have to go back to school in order to stay out of jail?" I'm fighting to keep the boy from becoming a statistic, and he doesn't even care.

So I plead, not for Nineteen to obey the law, but for him to do right by me. "You owe every Black woman who cares for you an obligation you won't be able to repay if you're working off some ill-gotten debt to a society you don't owe," I tell him.

Some listen. Most don't. My successes are few; I decided to give up at least once a week. But I keep pressing because I don't want to leave stranded the few I do manage to help.

Those wins notwithstanding, my frustrations remain. Just yesterday, one asked me to stop bothering him. "You're not my mother," he said. "Why are you messing with me? Just let me do my time." Lots of them, in fact, ask me to leave them alone. They tell me, "It ain't no thing." But, more often than not, the phrase that I hear is the chilling "I can jail."

Of course, I know I only see the problems. Nineteen represents himself, well, in large numbers everywhere. I have seven I claim outright, you know - not currently Nineteen - but Black and male. One I married; four came with him, and two I produced on my own. The older ones have already been Nineteen. They've had their troubles, but they're all okay now. The ones I made myself, however, are still young; they have a lot to learn.

Living well in a world that does not always see your clearly is a difficult thing to do. My boys must be able to ignore those who ridicule their efforts to do well in school while remaining strong even among those who find that strength intimidating. Tough lessons, these, but they must learn them if they are going to do Nineteen the right way. I don't want them standing before some judge who may see them as a statistic. If they mess around and get before the wrong guy, then where will they be?

Jail, of course, is the answer to that question. The very same place that I wound up sending Nineteen today. Frustrated because I can't fix the world, and Nineteen won't let me help him live better in it, I shake my head, but must move on. I have thirty more cases to hear.

"To jail or not to jail?" that is the question. How hard am I supposed to try without his help? Doesn't he see how so much of the harm he causes lands right in some sister's lap?

That is why I told Nineteen he owed me. "Consider the sisters in your life," I say. "It isn't always about you". Then I remind him that, whether or not he understands it, when you jail, we do too.