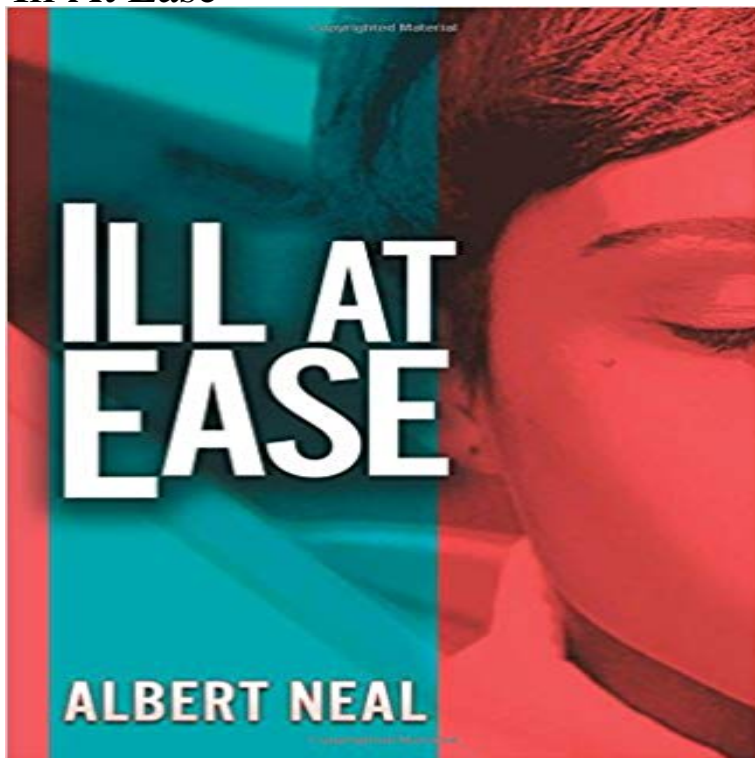


Ill At Ease



Few municipalities inspire dread like the city of Compton. A place that reveals itself at night, Compton moves to the throb of hardcore hip hop, the blare of car alarms, and the staccato of gunshots. Only the tree-lined streets of single-family homes allude to Compton's bucolic past. If Compton's reality isn't enough, then Monique Johnson, Felicia's self-centered, cruel, and irrational aunt, suffices. Beyond corrigibility and a shameless coward at heart, Monique has fostered Felicia and three boys to supplement her income and sustain her facade of prosperity. Felicia escapes Compton and her aunt with the aid of overzealous teachers and counselors who pad her college application and help Felicia gain acceptance into a prestigious women's college in Atlanta. Believing she's fine-tuned a permanent exit from her foster home, Felicia seizes the moment to denounce her aunt's ugly ways. At Wrightmen College, Felicia rooms with Fatima, an Oakland native and bohemian scholar; she dates Sergio, a handsome engineering major with a killer smile; and socializes with Tanisha, Sharika, and Michelle, a trio of party girls who quickly accept Felicia into their fold. Outwardly, Felicia enjoys a rich collegiate experience though privately she is haunted by her scholastic shortcomings. Aware she is in over her head, Felicia refuses to seek help. Things quickly fall apart. Consumed by her own needs, Felicia causes a split between her and Sergio, who seeks the comfort of another woman and inadvertently sleeps with a member of Felicia's circle. Meanwhile, Felicia shows visible signs of stress and depression conditions that are exacerbated when the college threatens Felicia with expulsion. Felicia fails to raise her G.P.A., a disappointment that awakens her worst nightmare: she is forced to return to Compton and to her aunt, Monique, who greatly anticipates revenge. As soon as Felicia arrives, Monique pounces on her

niece. Fist to fist, the two clash over their differences, which leaves Felicia battle scarred and weary. To worsen matters, Felicia has contracted an STD from Sergio. Now deeply depressed, Felicia seeks both physical and mental health services. Felicia follows a therapist's advice and enrolls at a local community college where she meets an august, no-nonsense English instructor by the name of Kenneth Gardner. At first the elitist-minded Felicia is turned off by Gardner, her fellow students, and the college, but she quickly accepts and adapts to her situation. Still unfocused, Felicia fails Gardner's course, though, later, they experience a chance encounter at a mall. Felicia begs her former instructor to tutor her. Reluctantly, Gardner agrees. Soon after, things turn intimate between the two though not at the expense of Felicia's instruction. Months later, Felicia reapplies but is denied acceptance at Wrightmen College. Undaunted, she enrolls at Roark University, Wrightmen's sister institution. In Atlanta Felicia achieves successes; she impresses her peers and gains the support of Joy Flintlock. Still, despite these achievements, Felicia's depression threatens to return. The close of her collegiate journey and strained relationship with Gardner leave Felicia disheartened until a conversation with Fatima moves Felicia to action. Felicia pursues an internship as a tutor and mentor to seven high-school girls who live in a group home. Unfortunately, Felicia's goodwill is rejected. The girls, led by rabble-rouser Charlotte McMurphy, sabotage Felicia's efforts and cause Felicia to rethink her motives. Although Felicia is physically wounded after a bloody altercation with Charlotte, the experience Felicia gains from working at the girls' home strengthens her character and worldview. Felicia develops a sense of purpose and efficacy, tools she uses to further transform her life after she lands an important job as a staff analyst at a major Atlanta-based corporation.

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