



Chapter 3: Stranger

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CHAPTER FOUR

Stranger

THE SETTLEMENT IS A PLANET AWAY FROM ONE POST ROAD. A LITTLE HUDDLE, A BIT OF SPRAWL, IT HAS CLAIMED THE SLOPE OF A HILL AND THE VALLEY BELOW SINCE WORLD WAR I. NO ONE USES ITS NAME—NOT THE POST OFFICE OR THE CENSUS BUREAU. THE STATE TROOPERS KNOW IT WELL, HOWEVER, AND A FEW PEOPLE WHO USED TO WORK IN THE OLD RELIEF OFFICE HAVE HEARD OF IT, BUT THE NEW EMPLOYEES OF THE COUNTY WELFARE OFFICE HAVE NOT. FROM TIME TO TIME TEACHERS IN DISTRICT 10 HAVE HAD STUDENTS FROM THERE BUT THEY DON'T

USE THE WORD 'SETTLEMENT.' 'RURALS' IS WHAT THESE STRANGE UNTEACHABLE CHILDREN ARE LABELED. ALTHOUGH IT INFURIATES ORDINARY STUDENTS FROM DECENT FARMING FAMILIES, GUIDANCE COUNSELORS HAD TO CHOOSE SOME SOCIALLY BENIGN TERM TO IDENTIFY THESE CHILDREN WITHOUT ANTAGONIZING THEIR PARENTS WHO MIGHT GET WIND OF IT. THE TERM PROVED SATISFACTORY ALTHOUGH NO SETTLEMENT PARENT EVER APPEARED TO REQUEST, PERMIT, OBSERVE, CONSULT OR COMPLAIN. NOTES OR FORMS PLACED IN THE CHILDREN'S UNSOAPED HANDS WERE NEVER RETURNED OR RESPONDED TO. RURALS SAT IN CLASS FOR A FEW MONTHS, SHARING TEXTBOOKS, BORROWING PAPER AND PENCILS, BUT PURPOSEFULLY SILENT AS THOUGH THEY WERE THERE TO TEST, NOT ACQUIRE, EDUCATION; TO WITNESS, NOT SUPPLY INFORMATION. THEY WERE QUIET IN THE CLASSROOM, AND KEPT TO THEMSELVES, PARTLY OUT OF CHOICE BUT PARTLY BECAUSE THEY WERE CAREFULLY AVOIDED BY THEIR PEERS. RURALS WERE KNOWN AS SUDDEN FIGHTERS-RELENTLESS AND VICIOUS. IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT SOME TIME IN THE LATE FIFTIES A PRINCIPAL MANAGED TO

LOCATE THEN VISIT THE HOME OF A RURAL NAMED OTIS RICK. OTIS HAD
LOOSENED A CHILD'S EYE ON THE PLAYGROUND AND HAD NOT UNDERSTOOD OR
OBEYED THE EXPELLED NOTICE STUCK IN HIS SHIRT POCKET. HE HAD COME BACK
EVERY DAY, HIS VICTIM'S DRIED BLOOD STILL ON HIS SLEEVES. NOT MUCH IS
KNOWN OF THIS OFFICIAL VISIT TO DEMAND OTIS' PERMANENT ABSENCE-EXCEPT
ONE VIVID DETAIL. WHEN THE PRINCIPAL LEFT THE RICK PROPERTY HE HAD TO
COVER THE WHOLE LENGTH OF THE VALLEY ON FOOT BECAUSE HE HAD BEEN
GIVEN NO TIME OR CHANCE TO GET BACK IN HIS CAR. THE DE SOTO WAS TOWED
BACK TO TOWN BY STATE TROOPERS BECAUSE NOTHING COULD MAKE ITS OWNER
GO BACK TO RETRIEVE IT.

VERY OLD PEOPLE WHO WERE YOUNG DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION,
AND WHO STILL CALL THAT PART OF THE COUNTY THE SETTLEMENT COULD
DESCRIBE IN DETAIL THE HISTORY OF ITS INHABITANTS, IF ANY ONE ASKED. BUT AS
THEIR OPINIONS ARE SELDOM SOUGHT, SETTLEMENT PEOPLE HAVE IT THE WAY
THEY WANT IT-UN-EVOLVED AND REVEILED THEY ARE ALSO TOLERATED, LEFT ALONE,

AND FEARED. QUITE THE WAY IT WAS IN 1912 WHEN THE JUTE MILL WAS ABANDONED AND THOSE WHO COULD LEAVE LEFT AND THOSE WHO COULD NOT [THE BLACK ONES BECAUSE THEY HAD NO HOPE OR THE WHITE ONES WHO HAD NO PROSPECTS] LOLLED ON, MARRYING ONE ANOTHER , SORT OF, AND FIGURING OUT HOW TO STAY ALIVE FROM DAY TO DAY. THEY BUILT THEIR OWN HOUSES FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S SCRAPS, OR THEY ADDED ON TO THE WORKERS' CABINS LEFT BY THE JUTE COMPANY: A SHED HERE, A ROOM THERE TO THE CLUSTER OF LITTLE TWO-ROOMS-AND-A-STOVE HUTS THAT WAVERED ON THE SLOPE OR SANK IN THE VALLEY. THEY USED STREAM AND RAIN WATER, DRANK COW'S MILK OR HOME BREW; ATE GAME, EGGS, DOMESTIC PLANTS, AND, IF ONE OF THEM HIRED OUT IN A FIELD OR A KITCHEN, THEY SPENT THE EARNINGS ON SUGAR, SALT, COOKING OIL, SODA POP, CORN FLAKES, FLOUR, DRIED BEANS AND RICE. IF THERE WERE NO EARNINGS THEY STOLE.

UNLIKE THE TRANQUILITY OF ITS NAME, THE SETTLEMENT HEAVED WITH LOYALTY AND LICENSE AND THE ONLY CRIME WAS DEPARTURE. ONE SUCH

TREASON WAS UNDERTAKEN BY A GIRL WITH MERGED TOES CALLED JUNIOR.

HER MOTHER, VIVIAN, HAD MEANT TO NAME HER RIGHT AWAY. THREE DAYS HAD

PASSED AFTER THE HARD DELIVERY BEFORE SHE COULD STAY AWAKE LONG

ENOUGH TO MAKE A DECISION—DURING WHICH TIME THE BABY GIRL'S FATHER

CALLED THE NEWBORN JUNIOR. EITHER AFTER HIMSELF —ETHAN PAYNE JR.— OR HIS

LONGING, FOR ALTHOUGH VIVIAN ALREADY HAD FOUR BOY CHILDREN, NONE OF

THEM WAS ETHAN'S. VIVIAN FINALLY DID CHOOSE A NAME FOR THE BABY AND

MAY EVEN HAVE USED IT ONCE OR TWICE AFTER ETHAN MOVED BACK TO HIS

FATHER'S HOUSE. BUT JUNIOR STUCK. NOTHING MORE WAS REQUIRED UNTIL THE

CHILD ENTERED DISTRICT 10 AND A LAST NAME WAS DEMANDED OF HER.

"JUNIOR VIVIAN," SHE MURMURED AND WHEN THE TEACHER SMILED INTO HER

OWN HAND, THE GIRL SCRATCHED HER ELBOW HAVING JUST REALIZED SHE

COULD HAVE SAID, "JUNE."

SETTLEMENT GIRLS WERE DISCOURAGED FROM SCHOOLING, BUT EACH OF

HER UNCLES, MALE COUSINS AND HALF BROTHERS, HAD SPENT SOME TIME AT

DISTRICT 10. UNLIKE ANY ONE OF THEM, SHE WAS SELDOM TRUANT. AT HOME WITH NO ONE OR ANYONE IN CHARGE, SHE FELT LIKE ONE OF THE SETTLEMENT DOGS. FIFTY STRONG, THEY SWUNG BETWEEN SHORT CHAINS AND UNFETTERED ROAMING. BETWEEN FIGHTS AND MEALS THEY SLEPT LASHED TO TREES OR CURLED NEAR A DOOR. LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES, HOUNDS MATED WITH SHEPHERDS, COLLIES WITH LABRADOR. BY 1975 WHEN JUNIOR WAS BORN, THEY WERE AN ODD, ORIGINAL, ASTONISHINGLY HANDSOME BREED INSTANTLY RECOGNIZABLE, TO FOLKS WHO KNEW, AS A SETTLEMENT DOG-ADEPT AT KEEPING OUTSIDERS OUT, BUT AT THEIR BRILLIANT BEST WHEN HUNTING.

Hungry for her father, she begged to visit him. "Army" said her mother. "That's what I heard." MTK.

BORED AT LAST WITH THE DOGS AND HER MOTHER, FASTER AND SLYER THAN HER BROTHERS, AFRAID OF HER UNCLES AND UNAMUSED BY THEIR WIVES, JUNIOR WELCOMED DISTRICT 10. FIRST TO GET OUT OF THE SETTLEMENT, THEN FOR ITSELF. SHE WAS THE FIRST RURAL TO SPEAK UP AND MAKE A STAB AT HOMEWORK. THE GIRLS AVOIDED HER AND THE FEW WHO TRIED TO SPRINKLE THE SEEDS OF FRIENDSHIP WERE QUICKLY FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN THE UNTIDY *So she just had to wait for the train. A Tall handsome man she imagined he would be pro-teacher MTK.*

RURAL WITH ONE DRESS AND THE CRAFTY VENGEANCE LITTLE GIRLS KNOW HOW TO EXACT. JUNIOR LOST EVERY TIME, BUT BEHAVED AS THOUGH THE REJECTION WAS HER VICTORY, SMILING WHEN SHE SAW THE ONE-RECESS- FRIEND RETREAT TO HER ORIGINAL FOLD. IT WAS A BOY WHO SUCCEEDED AT BEFRIENDING HER. THE TEACHERS THOUGHT IT WAS BECAUSE HE FED HER YODELS AND SNO-BALLS FROM HIS LUNCH BAG, SINCE JUNIOR'S LUNCH MIGHT BE A SINGLE APPLE OR A MAYONNAISE SANDWICH STUFFED IN THE POCKET OF THE WOMAN'S SWEATER SHE WORE. THE PUPILS, HOWEVER, BELIEVED HE WAS PLAYING DIRTY WITH HER DOWN IN A DITCH SOMEWHERE AFTER SCHOOL--AND THEY TOLD HIM SO. BUT HE WAS A PROUD BOY, SON OF THE BOTTLING PLANT MANAGER WHO COULD HIRE AND FIRE THEIR PARENTS--AND HE TOLD THEM SO.

HIS NAME WAS PETER PAUL FORTAS AND, HAVING LIVED THROUGH ELEVEN YEARS OF BEING CALLED PEE PEE, HE HAD GROWN INSOLENT AND UNYIELDING TO POPULAR OPINION. PETER PAUL AND JUNIOR WERE NOT INTERESTED IN EACH OTHER'S BODIES. JUNIOR WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT VATS OF COKE SYRUP AND

CAPPING MACHINES. PETER PAUL WANTED TO KNOW IF IT WAS TRUE ABOUT BROWN BEARS IN THE HILLS AND WHETHER IT WAS THE CALVES OR THE SMELL OF MILK THAT ATTRACTED SNAKES. THEY TRADED INFORMATION LIKE RACE TRACK TIPSTERS, SKIPPING BIOGRAPHY TO GET TO THE MEAT OF THE GAME. ONCE, HOWEVER, HE ASKED HER IF SHE WAS COLORED. JUNIOR SAID SHE DIDN'T KNOW BUT WOULD FIND OUT FOR HIM. HE SAID IT DIDN'T MATTER BECAUSE HE COULDN'T INVITE GENTILES TO HIS HOUSE ANYWAY. HE DIDN'T WANT HER FEELINGS HURT. SHE NODDED, PLEASED WITH THE SERIOUS, PRETTY WORD HE HAD CALLED HER.

HE PILFERED FOR HER: A BALL POINT PEN, A PAIR OF SOCKS, ~~A SISTER'S SKIRT~~, A YELLOW BARRETTE FOR HER FINGER-COMBED HAIR. WHEN FOR CHRISTMAS SHE GAVE HIM A BABY COTTON-MOUTH CURLED IN A BOTTLE AND HE GAVE HER A JUMBO BOX OF CRAYONS IT WAS HARD TO TELL WHICH ONE WAS HAPPIER.

BUT THE BOTTLED COTTON MOUTH WAS A SNAKE, AFTER ALL, AND IT DID

THEM IN.

SOME OF JUNIOR'S UNCLES, IDLE TEENAGERS WHOSE BRAINS HAD BEEN DEEPLY INSULTED BY THE BLEAKNESS OF THEIR LIVES, ALTERNATED BETWEEN VIOLENCE AND COMA. THEY DID NOT BELIEVE THE JARRED SNAKE HAD BEEN FOR A CLASS ASSIGNMENT AS JUNIOR TOLD THEM WHEN ASKED "WHAT'S ET YOU HAULING OFF, GIRL?" OR IF THEY DID BELIEVE HER THE ACT WAS DEEPLY OFFENSIVE TO THEM. SOMETHING BELONGING TO THE SETTLEMENT BEING TRANSFERRED TO THE SITE OF A FAILURE SO DISMAL IT HAD NOT REGISTERED ON THEM AS FAILURE AT ALL—BUT AS THE TRIUMPH OF NATURAL LIGHT OVER INSTITUTIONAL DARKNESS. OR PERHAPS IT WAS TOO COLD FOR POSSUM, OR ONE OF THEM HAD NOT SHARED HIS BEER. WHATEVER THE REASON, THE UNCLES WERE WIDE AWAKE THE MORNING AFTER CHRISTMAS AND FUN-SEEKING.

JUNIOR WAS ASLEEP. HER HEAD ON A STAINED WHITE JESUS SAVES PILLOW, WRAPPED IN A BLANKET SERVING ALSO AS A MATTRESS. THE PILLOW, A CHRISTMAS GIFT FROM AN UNCLE'S WIFE WHO GOT IT FROM THE TRASH BOX OF HER THEN

EMPLOYER, ENCOURAGED DREAMS. THE CRAYONS, HELD TO HER CHEST, DECORATED THEM. SO COLORFUL WAS HER SLEEP AN UNCLE HAD TO TAP HER BEHIND WITH THE TOE OF HIS BOOT MORE THAN ONCE TO WAKE HER. THEY QUESTIONED HER ABOUT THE SNAKE AGAIN. THE CRAYON COLORED DREAMS DRAINED SLOWLY AS JUNIOR TRIED TO FIGURE OUT WHAT THEY WANTED, THERE BEING NO POINT IN WONDERING THE WHY OF ANYTHING WITH THEM. THEY DIDN'T KNOW THEMSELVES WHY THEY SET FIRE TO A CAR SEAT RATHER THAN REMOVE IT. OR WHY A SNAKE WAS IMPORTANT TO THEM. THEY WANTED THE COTTONMOUTH RETURNED TO ITS RIGHTFUL HOME .

AMONG THE THREATS IF SHE DIDN'T GO GET IT WERE "TO BREAK YOUR PRETTY LITTLE BUTT," AND "HAND YOU OVER TO VOSH." THIS LATTER SHE HAD HEARD MANY TIMES BEFORE AND THE POSSIBILITY THAT IT COULD HAPPEN, THAT SHE COULD BE HANDED OVER TO THE OLD MAN IN THE VALLEY WHO LIKED TO WALK AROUND WITH HIS PRIVATE PARTS IN HIS HAND SINGING HYMNS OF PRAISE, JOLTED HER UP FROM THE FLOOR, OUT OF REACHING HANDS AND THROUGH THE

DOOR. THE UNCLES CHASED HER, BUT SHE WAS SWIFT. CHAINED DOGS GROWLED, LOOSE ONES JOINED IN. ON HER WAY DOWN THE PATH, SHE SAW VIVIAN RETURNING FROM THE PRIVY.

"MA!" SHE CALLED.

"LEAVE HER 'LONE YOU GODDAM POLECATS," SCREAMED VIVIAN. SHE TOOK A FEW RUNNING STEPS BEFORE FATIGUE ENDED IN FUTILE ROCK THROWING AT THE BACKS OF HER YOUNGER BROTHERS. "LEAVE HER 'LONE. COME BACK HERE YOU POLECATS. YOU BETTER MIND ME." URGENT, HEART FELT, IF NOT ~~IN THE~~ ~~LEAST~~ OPTIMISTIC, THE WORDS WERE A COMFORT TO THE RUNNING GIRL. BAREFOOT, CLUTCHING A JUMBO BOX OF CRAYONS, JUNIOR DODGED, HID FROM AND MANAGED TO LOSE THE HOWLING UNCLES. SHE FOUND HERSELF IN THE KIND OF WOOD LUMBER MEN SALIVATE OVER. PECANS THE SIZE OF WHICH HAD NOT BEEN SEEN SINCE THE TWENTIES. MAPLES BOASTING SIX AND SEVEN TRUNK ARMS EACH. LOCUSTS, BUTTERNUT, WHITE CEDAR, ASH. HEALTHY TREES MIXED WITH SICK ONES. HUGE BLACK CAULIFLOWERS OF DISEASE GREW ON

SOME TRUNKS. OTHERS LOOKED WELL UNTIL A WIND, LIGHT AND PLAYFUL,
RUFFLED THEIR CROWNS. THEN THEY CRACKED AND FELL LIKE HEART ATTACK
VICTIMS, COPPER AND GOLD MEAL POURING FROM THE BREAK.

(Coronary?)

DARTING THEN PAUSING, JUNIOR ARRIVED AT A SUN LIT STAND OF BAMBOO
STRANGLING IN VIRGINIA CREEPER. THE HOWLING HAD STOPPED. SHE WAITED,
THEN CLIMBED A TK TO SCAN THE HILLS AND WHAT SHE COULD SEE OF THE
VALLEY. NO UNCLES IN SIGHT. JUST THE PARTING OF TREES WHERE THE CREEK
RAN. AND BEYOND IT THE ROAD.

THE SUN WAS HIGH WHEN SHE GOT TO ITS EDGE. OF NO IMPORTANCE TO
HER WERE FLESH CUTS, TWIGS EMBEDDED IN HER HAIR, BUT SHE MOURNED THE
SEVEN CRAYONS BROKEN IN FLIGHT, BEFORE SHE GOT TO USE EVEN ONE. VIVIAN
COULD NOT PROTECT HER FROM VOSH OR THE UNCLES, SO SHE DECIDED TO
FIND PETER PAUL'S HOUSE, WAIT FOR HIM SOMEWHERE NEARBY AND -WHAT?
WELL, HE WOULD HELP HER SOMEHOW. BUT SHE WOULD NEVER EVER ASK HIM
TO RETURN THE BABY COTTON MOUTH.

SHE STEPPED OUT ON TO THE ROAD AND HAD NOT GONE FIFTY FEET WHEN A TRUCK FULL OF UNCLES CLATTERED BEHIND HER. SHE JUMPED LEFT, OF COURSE, INSTEAD OF RIGHT, BUT THEY HAD ANTICIPATED THAT. WHEN THE FRONT FENDER KNOCKED HER SIDEWAYS, THE REAR TIRE CRUSHED HER TOES.

A BUMPY RIDE IN THE BED OF A TRUCK, A PLACE ON VIVIAN'S COT, WHISKEY IN HER MOUTH, CAMPHOR IN HER NOSE—NOTHING WOKE HER UNTIL THE PAIN RATCHET-TED DOWN TO UNBEARABLE. JUNIOR OPENED HER EYES TO FEVER AND A HURT SO STUNNING SHE COULD NOT CRY. DAY AFTER DAY SHE LAY THERE, FIRST UNABLE THEN REFUSING TO CRY OR SPEAK TO VIVIAN WHO WAS TELLING HER HOW THANKFUL SHE SHOULD BE THAT THE UNCLES HAD FOUND HER SPRAWLED ON THE ROAD SIDE, HER BABY GIRL JUNIOR STRUCK DOWN BY A CAR DRIVEN, NO DOUBT, BY A TOWN BASTARD TOO BIGGEDY TO STOP AFTER RUNNING OVER A LITTLE GIRL AND CHECK TO SEE IF SHE WAS DEAD OR LEASTWISE GIVEN HER A LIFT.

IN SILENCE JUNIOR WATCHED HER TOES SWELL, REDDEN, TURN BLUE, THEN BLACK, THEN MARBLE THEN MERGE. THE CRAYONS WERE GONE AND THE HAND

THAT ONCE HELD THEM NOW CLUTCHED A KNIFE READY FOR VOSH OR AN UNCLE
OR ANYONE STOPPING HER FROM THE SETTLEMENT VERSION OF CRIME: LEAVING.
GETTING OUT. CLEAN AWAY FROM PEOPLE WHO CHASED HER DOWN, RAN OVER
HER FOOT, LIED ABOUT IT, CALLED HER LUCKY AND WHO PREFERRED THE
COMPANY OF A SNAKE TO A GIRL. IN ONE YEAR SHE WAS GONE. TWO MORE
AND SHE WAS FED, BATHED, CLOTHED, EDUCABLE AND THRIVING. BEHIND BARS.

SOME OF THE EDUCATION AT CORRECTIONAL WAS ACADEMIC; MOST OF IT
WAS NOT. BOTH KINDS HONED THE CUNNING NEEDED TO SECURE A PLACE IN A
BIG, FANCY HOUSE ON POST ROAD WHERE THERE WAS NO UNIFORMED WOMAN
PACING IN THE HALF LIGHT OF A CORRIDOR OR OPENING DOORS TO CHECK;
WHERE THE SLEEP THRU OF BODES CLOSE BY SIPHONED THE AIR.

SWALLOWED IN ^{the} A RED SUIT, JUNIOR STOOD AT THE WINDOW AND LOOKED
AGAIN AT THE BOY BELOW WHILE HEED RUMMAGED IN A FOOT LOCKER. EARLIER
SHE HAD SEEN CHRISTINE SHOOT DOWN THE DRIVEWAY LEAVING A BOY HOLDING
A PAIL AND SHIVERING IN THE YARD. NOW SHE WATCHED HIM WIPE HIS NOSE

Here was the right place and
~~instead~~ There was him. Letting her know in
every way the place was hers - had been waiting
for her. She had dreamed him etc. (see
yellow tablet)

WITH THE BACK OF HIS WRIST THEN BRUSH THE RESIDUE ON HIS JEANS. JUNIOR SMILED. AND WAS SMILING STILL WHEN HEED CALLED OUT TO HER.

"HERE IT IS. I FOUND IT." SHE WAVED A SILVER FRAMED PHOTOGRAPH. "I KEEP VALUABLES LOCKED UP IN ONE PLACE OR ANOTHER AND SOMETIMES I FORGET WHERE."

JUNIOR LEFT THE WINDOW, KNELT NEXT TO THE FOOTLOCKER AND GAZED AT THE PHOTOGRAPH. A WEDDING. FIVE PEOPLE. ^{him)} THE GROOM, LOOKING TO THE LEFT AT A WOMAN WHO, HOLDING A SINGLE ROSE, FOCUSED A FROZEN SMILE AT THE CAMERA.

"SHE LOOKS LIKE THE WOMAN DOWNSTAIRS, ^oCHRISTINE," SAID JUNIOR POINTING.

"WELL SHE'S NOT," SAID HEED.

THE WOMAN HELD ^{his} ~~THE GROOM~~'S ARM, AND ALTHOUGH HE WAS LOOKING AT HER, HIS OTHER ARM WAS AROUND THE BARE SHOULDER OF HIS TINY BRIDE. HEED WAS SWAMPED BY THE OVER SIZE WEDDING GOWN FALLING

FROM HER SHOULDERS AND THE ORANGE BLOSSOMS AT HER CHEST. TO
HER LEFT WAS A SLICK LOOKING HANDSOME MAN SMILING TO HIS LEFT AT
A WOMAN WHOSE CLENCHED HANDS EMPHASIZED MORE THAN THE
ABSENCE OF A BOUQUET.

"I DON'T LOOK SO DIFFERENT, DO I?" ASKED HEED.

"WHY IS YOUR HUSBAND LOOKING AT HER AND NOT YOU?"

"TRYING TO CHEER HER UP, I SUPPOSE. HE WAS LIKE THAT."

"THAT YOUR BRIDESMAID?" ASKED JUNIOR, POINTING TO THE CLENCH-
HANDED WOMAN. " SHE DOESN'T LOOK TOO HAPPY EITHER."

"NO. SHE DOESN'T, DOES SHE? CAN'T SAY IT WAS A HAPPY WEDDING. BILL
COSEY WAS VERY MARRIAGE-ING YOU KNOW. A LOT OF WOMEN WANTED TO BE
IN MY SLIPPERS."

JUNIOR EXAMINED THE PICTURE AGAIN, ~~THINKING THE GUY LOOKED OLD~~
~~ENOUGH TO BE HEED'S GRANDFATHER.~~ "WHO'S THAT OTHER GUY?" SHE ASKED.

"OUR BEST MAN. A VERY FAMOUS MUSICIAN IN HIS DAY. YOU TOO YOUNG

TO KNOW ABOUT HIM."

"THESE THE PEOPLE YOU'RE WRITING ABOUT?"

"YES. WELL, SOME. MOSTLY ABOUT PAPA-BILL-HIS PEOPLE, HIS FATHER.

YOU CAN'T BELIEVE HOW HARD IT WAS FOR THEM TO GET AHEAD...."

THERE WAS MORE THAN ONE REASON JUNIOR STOPPED LISTENING. ONE WAS THAT SHE GUESSED HEED DIDN'T WANT TO WRITE A BOOK; SHE WANTED TO TALK, ALTHOUGH WHY SHE HAD TO PAY SOMEBODY TO TALK TO, JUNIOR HADN'T FIGURED OUT YET. THE OTHER WAS THE BOY SHIVERING OUTSIDE. SHE COULD HEAR THE FAINT SCRAPES OF HIS SHOVEL MOVING SLUSH, TAPPING ICE.

"DOES HE LIVE AROUND HERE?"

"WHO?"

"KID OUTSIDE."

"OH, THAT'S SANDLER'S BOY. HE RUNS ERRANDS, KEEPS THE YARD UP. NICE BOY."

"WHAT'S HIS NAME?"

"ROMEN. HIS GRANDFATHER WAS A FRIEND TO MY HUSBAND. THEY FISHED TOGETHER. PAPA HAD TWO BOATS, YOU KNOW. ONE NAMED FOR HIS FIRST WIFE AND ONE NAMED FOR ME...."

SIXTEEN, MAYBE OLDER. NICE NECK.

"...HE TOOK IMPORTANT PEOPLE DEEP SEA FISHING. THE SHERIFF, CHIEF SILK, THEY CALLED HIM. HE WAS PAPA'S BEST FRIEND. AND THE BIG NAME SINGERS AND BANDLEADERS. BUT HE LIKED SANDLER EVEN THOUGH HE WAS JUST A LOCAL MAN WORKING IN THE CANNERY LIKE MOST EVERYBODY THEN, BUT PAPA LIKED HIM....

HE WON'T LIKE THIS OLD LADY SUIT I GOT ON.

"HE WAS LIKE THAT. LEFT HIM A BOAT IN HIS WILL. EVERYBODY LOVED PAPA AND HE LOVED EVERYBODY. OF COURSE HE LEFT ME THE MOST THO' TO HEAR SOME PEOPLE A WIFE SHOULDN'T BE CARED FOR..."

LIKE THE BOYS AT CAMPUS 4 SHOOTING BASKETS, US LOOKING AT THEM THROUGH THE WIRE, DARING THEM; THEM LOOKING BACK AT US, PROMISING US.

"I WAS LUCKY, I KNOW THAT. MY MOTHER WAS AGAINST IT AT FIRST. HIS

AGE AND ALL, BUT DADDY KNEW TRUE LOVE WHEN HE SAW IT. AND LOOK HOW IT
TURNED OUT. ALMOST THIRTY YEARS OF PERFECT BLISS..."

GUARDS JEALOUS, ROUGHING THEM UP BECAUSE WE KEPT ON LOOKING,
GREEDY. LIKE FANS, WATCHING THOSE DAMP SWEATS RISE.

" NEITHER ONE OF US EVEN LOOKED AT ANYBODY ELSE. BUT IT SURE
WASN'T EASY GREASY RUNNING THE HOTEL. EVERYTHING WAS ON ME. WITH
NOBODY TO COUNT ON. NOBODY..."

SIXTEEN AT LEAST, MAYBE MORE. SHOOTS BASKETS, TOO. I CAN TELL.

HALF AN HOUR LATER JUNIOR HAD CHANGED BACK INTO LEATHER. WHEN
ROMEN SAW HER HE THOUGHT WHAT HIS GRANDFATHER MUST HAVE THOUGHT
AND GRINNED IN SPIKE OF HIMSELF.

JUNIOR LIKED THAT. THEN, SUDDENLY, LIKE THE BOYS ON CAMPUS 4, HE
SLOUCHED-INDIFFERENT, READY TO BE TURNED DOWN, READY TO POUNCE.
JUNIOR DIDN'T GIVE HIM TIME TO DWELL ON THE MATTER.

"DON'T TELL ME YOU'RE FUCKING THESE OLD WOMEN TOO."

TOO.

Fought
ROMEN'S EMBARRASSMENT AT HER SUGGESTION MIXED WITH PRIDE. SHE
ASSUMED HE WAS CAPABLE OF IT. OF HAVING SCORED SO MANY TIMES HE COULD
CHOOSE ANY WOMAN AND IN PAIRS, MACEO, IN PAIRS.

"THEY TELL YOU THAT?"

"NO. BUT I BET THEY THINK ABOUT IT."

"YOU RELATED TO THEM??"

"NO WAY. I WORK HERE NOW."

"DOING WHAT?"

"THIS AND THAT."

ra "WHAT KIND OF THIS? *ra* WHAT KIND OF THAT?"

JUNIOR CIRCLED ROMEN. SHE LOOKED AT THE SHOVEL IN HIS HANDS.

with sofas and every thing.
"THEY GOT ROOMS THEY NEVER GO IN."

Then his crotch, 1 and then his face
"OH, YEAH?"