



"She never took her eyes off the trays..."

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She never took her eyes off the trays. Never met Theo's hateful stare until he gave her change at the register. Then she looked right at him and said, "I see why you need a posse. Your dick don't work one on one?"

Theo shouted a nasty word to her back but it fell flat with no audience but me. Long after the door slammed, he kept on repeating it. Typical. Young people can't waste words because they don't have too many.

When Maceo walked in, ready to take over before the after-church lines started forming, Theo was dribbling air balls in his dream court behind the register. As if he'd just been signed by Orlando and the Wheatie people too. Not a bad way to work off shame. Quick, anyway. Takes some people a lifetime.

This Junior girl—something about her puts me in mind of a local woman I know. ^{Name of Celestial.} When she was young, that is, though I doubt if Junior or any of these modern tramps could match her style. Mr. Cosey knew her too, although if you asked him he'd deny it. Not to me, though. Mr. Cosey never lied to me. No point in it. I knew his first wife almost as long as he did. I knew he adored her and I knew what she thought of him after she found out where his money came from. Contrary to the tale he put in the

street, the father he bragged about had earned his way as a Court informer. The one police could count on to know where a certain colored boy was hiding, who sold liquor, who had an eye on what property, what was said at church meetings, who was agitating to vote, collecting money for a school—all sorts of things Dixie law was interested in. Well paid, tipped off and favored for fifty-five years, Daniel Robert Cosey kept his evil gray eye on everybody. For the pure power of it, people supposed, because he had no joy, and the money he got for being at the beck and call of whitefolks in general and police in particular didn't bring comfort to him or his family. Whites called him Danny Boy. But to Negroes his initials, DRC, gave rise to the name he was known by: Dark. He worshiped paper money and coin, withheld decent shoes from his son and passable dresses from his wife and daughters until he died leaving 114,000 resentful dollars behind. The son decided to enjoy his share. Not throw it away, exactly, but use it on things Dark cursed: good times, good clothes, good food, good music, dancing til the sun came up in a hotel made for it all. The father was dreaded; the son was a ray of light. The cops paid off the father; the son paid off the cops. What the father corrected, the son celebrated. The

father a miser? The son an easy touch. Spendthrift didn't cut ice with Julia. Her family were farmers always being done out of acres by white landowners and spiteful Negroes. She froze when she learned how blood soaked her husband's money was. But she didn't have to feel ashamed too long. She gave birth and didn't wait to see if history skipped a generation or blossomed in her son.

Romen scored, the score was big time. A teacher, they wondered? Somebody's older sister? He wouldn't say--even resisting the "your mama" that rose to his lips. In any case, he had neck now. And when he wasn't stretching it, he was gazing through the classroom window dreaming of what had already taken place and imagining new ways to do it. The boots. The black socks. With the security cap she would look like an officer. Hard enough to drill for oil, Romen adjusted his chair and tried to focus on the Eighteenth Amendment the teacher was explaining with such intensity he almost understood her. (over)

Junior had use of the Cosey's car. To shop, go to the bank, post office, do errands Miss Heed needed done and Miss Christine didn't want to do. So if he skipped sixth period, or if study hall preceded lunch, Junior picked him up on Prince Arthur Street and they drove to one of their pre-planned spots. The plan (hers) was to make it everywhere. To map the county with grapple and heat. On the list, but not managed yet, was Bethune High (preferably in a class room); the Cine-plex, the beach, the abandoned Cannery, the phone booth on Baron Street near Softee's and, her favorite, the bus station. So far they had accomplished only one

How was he supposed to concentrate
on a history lesson when Junior's neck
was a study? Her armpits required (more)
exploration; her skin demanded closer
analyses. Was its perfume flower-y or
more like rain? Besides, he had to
memorize ~~all~~ the ³⁸ ways she could smile
and what each one meant. He needed a
whole semester to figure out her ^{sci-fi} eyes:
the lids, the lashes, irises & so shiny
black she could be an alien. One he
would fight to join on the spaceship.

outside-her-bedroom event—a back seat adventure one evening in Café Ria's parking lot. Today he would meet her behind Videoland, for some fast stroking before she drove him to Monarch Street where he would pull leaves from the gutters. Then she would drive him home, stopping maybe at a different phone booth on the way. Exciting as all that travel was to anticipate, indelible as this town was becoming (he sort of owned Café Ria now, and Theo too), nothing beat the sight of a straddling Junior in bed, booted, hatted, with a visor throwing her eyes into shadow. Theo, Jamal and Freddie could keep whatever tenth grade party girl in plastic heels they found. Where was the neck in that? No arms tightening but their own; no eager mouths but their own; no eeeee's of pleasure but their own. Most of all no privacy. Instead they needed a chorus of each other to back them up, make it real, help them turn down the trumpet screech in their own ears. All the time doing it, not to the girl but for, maybe even to, one another. He, on the other hand, gripped and nibbled on, had a woman of his own, one who stepped up and snatched privacy right in the middle of a stupid-blind public.

Romen raised his eyes to the clock. Two minutes—forever—before the

bell.

Junior kept the motor running. She had no driver's license and wanted to be in position to take off if noticed by a cop cruiser. She was hungry again. Two hours earlier she had eaten four strips of bacon, toast and two eggs. Now she thought of getting burgers and shakes at Softees to take back to Videoland. She could do two things at the same time. Even three. Romen would like that and so would her Good Man. Sometimes he sat at the foot of her bed—just to watch her sleep, and when she woke he winked before he smiled and stepped away. Funny how being seen all the time, watched day and night at Correctional had infuriated her, but being looked at by her Good Man excited her. She didn't have to turn her head to know his foot was on the door saddle or that his fingers were drumming a window sill. The aftershave announced his entrance. And if she were still enough, he might whisper: "nice hair", "take it", "good girl", "sweet tits", "why not?" More understanding than any G.I. Joe. Her luck was still holding: a lovely, warm place to stay, a lot of really good food, a (paying) job—more than she expected when, because of her age, Correctional had to release her. But

the bonus of Romen was like the plus sign after an "A". The ones she got when she had been a model student. Considered model until they made it seem as though she had killed him. Why would she do that? Mess up just when she was about to graduate.

Killing the Administrator was not on her mind—stopping him was. Some girls liked his Conferences; traded them for Office Duty, underwear, trips off-campus. But not her. To Junior, already prized for her keyboard skills, she always had office work, besides cotton underwear was just fine; and the thrill of off-campus trips was erased by the watchful eyes of townspeople as you strolled through the aisles, or put your elbows on the Burger King counter. Anyway she got her sex from Campus A or from a girl crying for home. Who wanted or needed an old man (he must be thirty, at least) wearing a wide red tie pointing down to a penis that couldn't compete with raw vegetables, bars of soap, kitchen utensils, lollipops or anything else inventive girls could conjure?

The Exit Conference was scheduled for Friday, and when he changed it to Monday, four days earlier, Junior thought a prize or a job offer would be discussed. At fifteen she was free to leave, purged of the wickedness that

had landed her there, and return to her family, not one of whom had visited in the whole three years. She had no intention of going back to the Settlement. Correctional had saved her from them. But she did want to see the outside the Settlement world; the televised one, the one new Correctional students talked about. Eagerness to get out would have prevented any last minute infraction; her known good behavior would have disallowed it. Still the Committee refused to believe her, believed the Administrator instead and the Guidance Counselor who knew better.

The Exit Conference started out great. The Administrator, relaxed and talkative, described his hopes for Correctional, for her. He strolled to the sliding doors that opened on to a small balcony, invited her to join him and admire the grand trees surrounding. Perched on the railing, he suggested she do the same, congratulating her, reminding her to keep in touch. He was there for her. Smiling he told her she might want to get a haircut before she left. "Such beautiful hair, wild." He touched it, patting her head fondly, at first and, then, drawing closer, pressed it. Hard. Junior dropped to her knees and while the Administrator's hands were busy unbelting, hers went to the back of his knees, upending him over the railing. He fell one

story. Only one. The Guidance Counselor who saw him fall and rushed to his aid, saw also the loosened belt and open fly. His testimony, arranged of course to keep his job, supported the Administrator who was as confounded and bewildered as anybody at the "sudden, strange, self-loathing behavior" of a once model student. The Committee, pained by Junior's use of the word "lick" in her defense, quickly transferred her from student to inmate for a violence they could only shake their heads at.

Junior learned a lot in the next three years. If she ever had a moment's thought that after Correctional she would fail real life, the thought quickly evaporated. Reform then Prison refined her insight. In Correctional real time is not spent; it is deposited, bit by manageable bit. What to do for the next half hour, ten minutes. It will take seven minutes to do your nails; twenty to wash your hair. A minute and a half to get from gym to class. Games, ninety minutes. Two hours of television before lights out and the falling down years of sleeping while awake to the "there" of other people's bodies. Unlike what people thought, in the daily grid of activities, to plan was fatal. Stay ready, on tippy-toe. And read fast: gestures, eyes, mouths, tones of speech, body movement-minds. Gauge the moment. Recognize a

chance. It's all you. And if you luck out, find yourself near an open wallet, window or door GO! It's all you. All of it. Good luck you found, but good fortune you made. And her Good Man agreed. As she knew from the beginning, he liked to see her win.

They recognized each other the very first night when he gazed at her from his portrait. But it was in dream they got acquainted. No fuss, no bother, no recriminations—he lifted her up to his shoulders where she rode through an orchard of green Granny apples. When she woke in a bright, cold room the dream-warmth was better than the blanket. A tub bath (at last) before eagerly climbing the stairs partly to show her new boss lady how punctual she was; mostly to catch another glimpse of her Good Man's shoulders. Heed was sitting in bed, the crown of her head just under the frame's gilt. Junior told her she didn't want to go pick up her clothes—that she would wear what she had on until she could afford new things. Heed directed her to a closet where a red suit hung in plastic. It was ugly and too big, but Junior was thinking how much she wanted to undress right there in Heed's bedroom while he watched.

"Get some breakfast and come right on back," said Heed.

She did: grapefruit, scrambled eggs, bacon, grits—chatting with Christine in an old woman's suit.

It was when she had finished, on her way back to Heed that she knew for sure. In the hallway on the second floor she was flooded by his company: a tinkle of glee, a promise of more; then her attention drawn to a door opposite the room she had slept in. Ajar. A light pomade or after shave in the air. She stepped through. Inside a kind of office with sofa, desk leather chairs, dresser. Junior examined it all. She stroked ties and shirts in the closet; smelled his shoes; rubbed her cheek on the sleeve of his seersucker jacket. Then, finding a stack of undershorts, she took off the red suit, stepped into the shorts and lay on the sofa. His happiness was unmistakable. So was his relief at having her there, loving his things and enjoying herself in front of him.

Later, on her way back to Heed's room, Junior looked over her shoulder toward the door—still ajar—and saw the cuff of a white shirt sleeve, his hand closing the door. Junior laughed knowing as she did that he did too.

And wouldn't you know it? Right outside Heed's window was a boy. For

her. Everything was becoming clear. If she pleased both women, they could live happily together. All she had to do was study them, learn them. Christine didn't care about money, liked feeding her and encouraged her to take the car. Heed worried about gasoline prices and the value of dated milk cartons and day old bread. Junior saw both Christine's generosity and Heed's stinginess as forms of dismissal; one was "Take what you need and leave me alone." The other was "I'm in control and you are not." Neither woman was interested in her—except as she simplified or complicated their relationship with each other. Not quite a go-between; not quite a confidante, it was a murky role in which she had discovered small secrets. Among the new never worn clothes in the locked suitcases were a short, sheer nightie, aqua fuzz at the hem; a carton that explained its contents as a douche bag; a jar of mustard yellow Massengill powder. Things needed on vacation? For escape? Christine took a bunch of vitamin pills and poured Michelob in empty Pepsi cans. Both women regularly bought and wore sanitary napkins, and threw them in the trash completely unstained. Heed's signature on a check was a press of her initials, HC, rickety- and slanting to the left.

In time the women would tire of their fight, leave things to her. She could make it happen, arrange harmony when she felt like it, the way she had at Correctional when Betty cut in on Sarah at the Christmas Dance and they had fought themselves into Isolation . Junior had brokered the peace when the girls returned, bristling, to the Common Room, threatening Behavior that could ruin it for the whole of Mary House. Siding with each antagonist she had become indispensable to both. How much harder could it be with women too tired to shop; too weak to dye their own hair. Too old to remember the real purpose of an automobile. He chuckled.

She gunned the motor. Vanilla? Strawberry? Romen was in view.