



"I don't know what to say to the boy..."

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"I don't know what to say to the boy."

"Well, think of something. Fast. Or I will."

"What? What can you tell him?"

"The purpose of a zipper. The responsibility of a father. The mortality rate of AIDS."

"AIDS?"

"Who knows where she's been or with who? Who is she, anyway? Got no people, nobody ever heard of her. Dresses like a street woman. Acts like a, a..."

"She wouldn't be working for them if she wasn't all right. Had references or some such."

"Are you crazy or just pretending?"

"Vida."

"Christine has a reputation make Jezebel cringe, and Heed's a Johnson remember."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means morals of any kind whatsoever are not known in that family. What would Heed, who got married at the ripe old age of eleven, know about morals, restraint...."

"She never ran around on Cosey and you know she never condoned Christine's past. You can't blame her for what her daddy did."

"No, but I can take note of what her daddy is. Did she or didn't she try to burn her own house down?"

"I never did believe that."

"Well the seed don't fall far from the pod. If they take in that kind of girl to work for them, what else might be going on over there? How can you trust either one of them? Just because Heed let ^SRomen clean her yard doesn't mean she's changed."

"Changed from what?"

"From a deceitful bitch who has to control people."

"I thought this was about Romen's behavior."

"It is. Behavior influenced by an ex-hooker and a witch. Listen Sandler, I am not about to be a great grandmother or an unpaid nurse or a deep pocketbook for some trashy teen mama just because you don't know what to say to a fourteen year old boy. Besides, we're responsible for Romen. Our own daughter expects us to be. Counts on us to be."

Sandler grunted and let his wife's argument, point by point, roll on. He did know what to say to Romen, but he knew it wouldn't matter. Forbidding it would just make the whole thing hotter, more enticing. He wouldn't be telling him to choose one girl over another, but to give up the only one he had complete physical access to. Like telling a duck not to waddle. He would have to think up something else. Condoms at the least, but Vida expected more—an end to the relationship. Add to that improbability the fact that he thought Romen was handling things pretty well, considering. He wasn't doping, ganged up, courting arrest and his house manners had definitely improved. But Vida was right. The neighborhood had changed and so had the times. They didn't know the girl, had no recent knowledge of what the Cosey women might be up to. Just gossip, speculation and grudges from local people who didn't know

anymore than they did. Once upon a time, everybody knew everything. Once upon a time, a man could speak to another about his son or daughter; or a group of women would swoop down on a fast girl. Except the Johnsons. Nobody swooped down on them. They were not typical, even in Up Beach where people lived on top of one another and every cough, every sidelong look was monitored.

Oh, Christ, he thought, that was fifty years ago. What was the point in remembering the good old days as though the past was pure. He knew for a fact it was simply stifled. Vida, in her tale of wickedness, had not said a word about Bill Cosey. She acted as though Heed had chased and seduced a fifty-two year old man older than her father. That she had chosen to marry him rather than having been told to. Vida, like most people, probably hated the idea that she stayed married to him, liked it, and took over his business. In their minds she was born a liar, a gold digger unable to wait for her twelfth birthday for pay dirt. They forgave Cosey. Everything. Even to the point of blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her. What was she supposed to do? Run away? Where? Was there some place Cosey or Wilbur Johnson couldn't reach?

He had seen Heed more recently than anyone the day he knocked on the door and asked her if she could take Romen on as after school help. She was civil. Neat as a pin, as always. Offered him iced tea, probably to let him see Christine's status in the house. Sandler had always found her less of a pain than others had. Because of his friendship with her husband, he guessed. Her edges were softened by his recollection of Bill Cosey telling him that he had not touched her until her period came; waited a year and only then took her on a honeymoon for the initiation. Still she was not easy to be around. He couldn't say whether she was good looking or not because "false", "touchy" were the words that came to his mind about her. False the way anybody would be who had jumped from a log to a castle overnight. Touchy the way anybody would be who had envy plus May on her back. But what Sandler saw was nothing like what Bill Cosey must have seen. For him it was as though twenty-five years hadn't happened. The Heed that Cosey reminisced about in his cups on the boat—as though she were dead—was not a frowning woman always on the look-out for a slight, a chance to find fault, but a long legged angel with candle eyes and a smile he couldn't help but join.

Uneasy with other men's sexual confidences (he certainly wasn't providing any of his own) Sandler always made it his business to change the subject. But he remembered Cosey's dream-bitten expression as he rambled on about his first sight of Heed: hips narrow, chest smooth as a plank, skin soft and damp, like a lip. Invisible navel above newborn hair. Cosey never explained the attraction any other way, except to say he couldn't wait to watch her grow. That the steady, up close observation most men don't know the pleasure of kept him not just true, but lively. Listening to Cosey's rapturous description of his wife, Sandler was not as repelled as he'd expected to be since the picture that emerged from the telling called to his mind not a child, but a fashion model. Although by then ^{Casey} ~~he~~ was fully involved with grown women, the memory of his child bride still stirred him. Vida had nothing to say about that, and Sandler didn't want the misery of bringing it up, of tilting his wife's idol with a blow of insight.

Oh, well. This is what I'm for, he thought. The day Romen came to stay he knew he had to protect him. From bad cops, street slaughter, dope death, prison shivs and friendly fire in whitefolks wars. He never would have believed a female would be a serious threat and his first real danger.

So he and Vida planned a way for him to be alone with his grandson. To his surprise the boy was as eager as he was. Did he want to talk too?

Vida stood at the window wiping her palms together—a gesture of accomplishment. Seeing her husband and grandson drive off together on an errand soothed her. Romen's generation made her nervous. Nothing learned from her own childhood or from raising Dolly worked ~~with them~~, and everywhere parents were flummoxed. These days the first thought at Christmas was the children; in her own generation it was the last. Now children wept if their birthdays weren't banquets; then the day was barely acknowledged. The hardship stories told by her parents that mesmerized and steeled her made Romen cover his mouth to disguise a yawn. The gap was certainly normal now, but it wasn't eternal. That kid who threw a bucket of offal on Bill Cosey was not alone. Many had cheered.

Laughter and applause interrupted the singing that extremely hot afternoon. Cosey had been repairing a fishing rod in back of the hotel. Casting, re-winding, casting again and then walking around to the front to see what the commotion was; to listen, perhaps, to the singing, or read the signs held aloft, some pleading, some demanding. As he approached, rod

in hand, it looked to somebody like an excuse to raise the level from persuasion to argument to a drama carefully prepared for. A kid leapt forward with a pail and tossed its contents on Bill Cosey. The cheering subsided as Cosey remained where he was, animal waste spattering his shoes and trousers. He didn't move not even to examine the soiling. Instead he looked at each one as though photographing them. Then he leaned the fishing rod against the porch railing and walked toward them. Slowly.

"Hey Bella. Afternoon, Miss Barnes. Good to see you George; got that truck running yet?"

He spoke to young and older. "How you, doin' Pete. Your girl still in college? You looking good, Francie. Hi, there, Shoo-fly...."

Courteous replies met his greetings and countered the violent ~~odor~~ ^{Smell} of dung drying on his cuffs and paving his way. Finally he raised his hand in a general farewell and left them as though he'd been inaugurated or baptized. The crowd lingered, but in disarray. Such was the rift between generations in 1968, but Cosey had managed to span it, to de-tox it; to say "I am neither stranger nor enemy." Talk, then, respectful but serious, was

the bridge. Otherwise hog shit filled the gap. He never did what they were asking—give over some land—but he did try. Vida didn't know if it was May or Heed who prevented it, but she was thankful somebody had. Housing was more important than pottery classes. What would they be now? Homeless tai chi experts, mis-educated vagabonds raising their children in condemned buildings and flat bed trucks. The choice, she thought, was not whether to ~~nestle up~~^{surrender} to power or dislodge it. It was to do your duty to your family, and, at the moment, that meant serious talk to a grandson.

Fifteen aluminum-foiled platters were stacked on newspaper in the back seat, a name taped to each one. The list of shut-ins Vida had clipped to the visor included addresses as though he might forget that Alice Brent was rooming now; that Mr. Royce had moved in with his daughter who worked nights. Or that Miss Coleman, still on crutches, was staying with her blind brother on Governor Street. The shut-ins had three choices: fish, chicken or barbecue, and the conflagration of aromas changed his car from a machine to a kitchen where talk could be easy.

Romen turned the radio on soon as he slid in, fiddling the buttons until he found what he liked: the music Vida made him wear headphones to

hear. That way only the throb and Romen's listening face disturbed her—not the words. Sandler liked the music but agreed with his wife that unlike the suggestive language of their own generation ("I want some seafood, mama. Chicken and rice are very nice but gimme seafood, mama."), the language of Romen's music had the subtlety of an oil spill. "Polluting and disfiguring the natural mind." said Vida. Sandler reached over and turned the knob to "off." He expected a whine from Romen, but none came. They rode in silence until he arrived at the first house on the list. Sandler had to pull the hands of three children away from his trousers to get to the front door. Alice Brent insisted on inviting him in, relinquishing only when he told her she was first but he had fourteen deliveries left. Flattered, she let him go. He heard Romen click the radio back off, too late for Sandler not to notice. At least he respects my preference, he thought. Pulling away from the curb he tried to think of some small talk. Something they could share before the interrogation or the lecture began. They had no son. Dolly, a lovely obedient child, directed whatever rebellion she felt first into an early marriage, then into the armed forces. But it couldn't be that hard. Sandler's own father and grandfather had no trouble telling him what to do.

Short biting commands: "never carry a lazy man's load," when he hauled too much at once in order to save himself frequent trips. "If she don't respect herself she won't respect you" or "Don't hang your pants where you can't hang your hat," when he claimed a quick conquest. No long sermons and no talking back. None of that worked with Romen. Sulk was the result of Sandler's efforts along those lines. Nineties children didn't want to hear "sayings" or be managed by lessons too dusty to be read let alone understood. They got better advice from their hammering music. Straight no chaser. Black no sugar. Direct as bullet.

"She pregnant?"

Romen was startled but not angry or evasive. "No! Why you ask me that?"

Good, thought Sandler. Direct like his own father but minus the threat. "You spend an awful lot of time with her. Doing what?"

"Just stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Ride around, you know," said Romen. "Went out to that old hotel last Saturday. Just looking around." For a floor, a pallet, anything would

do as long as it was in a strange place. His palms were wet with excitement because she insisted he drive. Not just because he didn't know how, but also because she liked to nuzzle and distract him while he struggled to control the wheel, and for the thrill of nearly hitting a tree or skidding into a ditch while fingering each other.

"You got in there?" asked Sandler

"Yeah, it was open." The padlocked doors, the windows tight as iron so angered Romen he rammed his fist into a pane, matching the determination of Junior's hand in his jeans. They had thought the place would be scarey: cobwebs and garbage-y corners. Instead the kitchen, glowing in noon light, welcomed them to its table top as well as between its legs. Other rooms were dim, but no less promising. Junior counts each as they explore themselves in every one, all the way from the lobby floor to the top.

"I don't believe anybody's been in there for years. Must be rat heaven," Sandler said.

"Sorta." No rats. Birds. Flying and tittering in the rafters. The whole place smelled like wine.

"I take it they didn't get in your way?"

"No. I mean. We were just looking, fooling around, you know?"

"Who you think you talking to?"

"No, like, I mean..."

"Romen, we men or not?"

Romen looked at his high tops. Black canvas with a cool white circle.

"Okay, then. Get off it. Straight, now."

"Okay. Well. She likes, she likes to..." Romen rubbed his knees.

"And you don't?"

"Aw, you know how it is."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. I mean, yeah. We made out and, like, explored everywhere. No big deal." Except for the attic. Getting up there required hoisting himself on a chair to get to the chain to pull down the folded stairs and climb in there. "We need matches," he told her, "or a flashlight." "No we don't," she whispered. "I like it dark." A rustle of wings and twitter as they entered. "Bats?" he wondered, but the wings that flew past, shooting through the hall light filtering into the attic were yellow and he was about to

say "Look, canaries" when she pulled him to her. It was hide and seek *fearing through cob-webs* then. Losing then finding one another in a pitch black room; stumbling, bumping heads, tripping, falling grabbing a foot, a neck, then the whole person, they dared darkness with loud laughter and moans of pleasure and pain. Cartons toppled and crashed. Floor boards creaked then split beneath them, raking their nakedness and sharpening their play, lending it a high seriousness he could never have imagined.

"No big deal?"

"Well, it did get, you know. Rough, I guess you'd say. Know what I mean?" He pushed, no, slammed her against the wall—after she squeezed his privates—and she had groaned happily instead of crying out or screaming when he bit her nipple—hard. It shifted then. From black to red. It was as though outside, looking on he could see himself clearly in the dark—his bruised sweaty skin, his glittering teeth and half-closed eyes.

"What did you do, Romen. Out with it."

"Not me. Her."

"Will you just say it, boy. "

"She plays hard, that's all. I mean she likes being hurt."

Sandler braked at an intersection. It was a moment before he realized he had stopped at a green light. Romen was looking through the passenger window. Waiting for some response, some grown man comment worthy of his trust, his confidence. An answer to the question coiled in his confession. A chuckle from his grandfather would mean one thing. Reproach would mean another thing. Was there anything else? The traffic light changed.

"What do you think about that?" Sandler drove slowly through the red light pretending to be searching for an address.

"Weird. Whack." She didn't just like it. She preferred it. But the rush was in him as well. Standing next to himself—impressed, unsmiling—watching himself inflict and suffer pain above scream level where a fresh kind of joy lay, the Romen who could not bear mittens laced to a bed post, purple polish on bitten nails, the wine and vegetable smell of pulling bodies—that Romen evaporated. Never to be seen again, he was certain. Not in full, anyway. Just a faded version who, afterwards, felt annoyance instead of shame. Driving away from the hotel he complained ("Hey, girl. Stop it. You going to make me have a wreck.") about her leg banging his,

the tip of her tongue on his neck, nipples pushed into his ear. Then there was the other thing. For the first time Junior had taken off her boots and her socks. When they ^{had} undressed back in the kitchen, as usual she kept her socks on. In the attic she removed them, tying one tightly around his neck. He was half way down the attic ladder when he looked up. Junior, sitting in the opening, had one on, one off. He couldn't be sure—light in the hall was scarce—but he thought he saw her slip a hoof into the sock.

"Whack, huh. Well, I never believed much in free will. It ain't nothing if there's nothing you can control." Sandler parked in front of a pale blue house. The grass in front was patchy, starved for rain. "But of the few things you do have some say over, who you choose to hang out with is one. Looks like you hooked yourself up with somebody who bothers you, makes you feel uneasy. That feeling is information, information you can count on. You can't always pay attention to what other people say, but you should pay attention to that. Don't worry about whether backing off means you a wimp. It can save your life. You not helpless, Romen. Don't ever think that. Sometimes it takes more guts to quit than to keep on. Some friends you know better than to bring home. There's a good reason for

that, you understand me?"

"Yes, sir. I hear you."

"A good man is a good thing, but there is nothing in the world better than a good good woman. She can be your mother, your wife, your girlfriend, your sister or somebody you work next to. Don't matter. You find one, stay there. You see a scarey one, make tracks."

The platters were cold but still savory and Sandler's mood was cheerful as they completed the deliveries. Romen was eager to help, jumping out first at each stop, lifting trays like a waiter as he trotted to the doors. Vida would be pleased. Don't fret, he'd tell her. Relax. He glanced at his grandson who had not turned on the radio, just laid back on the head rest, asleep.

Romen, eyes closed, swallowed the saliva gathering in his mouth in anticipation of Junior's. Just talking about her turned him on. No matter what bothered him, she knocked him out. More than at first when she was the starter. Now with the tender mixed with the rough, the trite language of love smithereened by obscenities, he was the one in charge. He could beat her up if he wanted to and she would still go down. Funny. She was like a

gorgeous pet. Feed it or whip it—it loved you anyway.

The radio and tape player was for herself. The short handled sponge mop was for Heed. So was the hair brush with bristle softer than the other one. Junior spread the purchases on the dining room table. Heed might not appreciate the brush, but she would love the convenience of the little mop for personal hygiene. It even had a wrist loop so it wouldn't slip from hands that don't work properly. The best thing, thought Junior, was to convince her to get out of that tub and into a shower. Have a little seat put in there. Safer. Easier. Get her to have two showers installed--one for the second floor as well. All that cash and nothing to spend it on. Locking herself in at night, going nowhere in the day. Now she wanted to be driven out to the Hotel, in secret. Neither Heed nor Christine paid any attention to the rest of the house—what was needed in it. The dining room, big, never used, should be done over. Get rid of the ceiling fan, the ugly table. Put in some sofas, chairs, a television. Junior smiled realizing she was turning the space into Correctional's Rec Room. Well, why not? And the living room, too needed help. It had a re-run look like a house in an old tv show with

loud rich kids and talky parents. She walked across the hall and sat on the living room sofa. A sectional, turquoise on once-white carpeting. The glittery pear shaped lamps on the end tables were both cracked. Two panels of striped drapes sagged from their rods; others were ripped. Battle signs, she thought. Before they got too old or tired to do it anymore and settled for un-smash-able silence.

Sitting there Junior felt the kick of being, living, in a house, a real house, her first. A place with different reasons for each room and different things to put in them. She wondered what her Good Man liked. Velvet? Wicker? Had he picked this stuff? Did he even care? You didn't like it here, did you? Who broke the lamps? Who glued them back, Christine? Was it Heed who grabbed the drapes? She talks about you all the time. About how much she loved you, but she's faking it, right? And Christine hates you. Your eyes are smiling in your picture but your mouth looks hungry. You married an eleven year old girl. I ran away when I was eleven. They brought me back then put me in Correctional. I had a G.I. Joe but they took it. If you knew me then, nobody would have messed over me. You'd have taken care of me. Did you marry Heed to protect her?

Was that the only way? Do you like my Boyfriend? He's beautiful isn't he, and he loves me to death. I want to keep him, okay? An Old Man tried to make me do things. Force me. I didn't though. If you'd been there you'd have killed him. They said I tried to, but I didn't. Try to, I mean. I know you called me here. I read the ad in a paper I found in the bus station. It was lying right next to me on the bench. A long shot. I took two twenties from a woman's wallet. She left her purse on the sink when she went to the other end of the bathroom to dry her hands. I knocked her purse over and apologized. She didn't check. Dotty loaned me some of her clothes. Kind of. I mean she would've loaned them if I'd asked her to. I met her in the Red Moon. Correctional gave me one hundred dollars for three years' work. I spent it in movies and restaurants. Dotty waitressed at the Red Moon. We got on; laughed a lot. She invited me to stay over when I told her I was sleeping in daylight. Church pews, movies, in the sand near the piers. Moving all the time so Cops wouldn't see me and think I was drunk or on something. I never drink or do dope. It feels good but you miss a lot when your head is fucked. I don't want to miss anything, anything at all. Being locked away all those years. My fault, I guess. I was fifteen and on

my way out. I should have known. But I only knew Boys, not Men. You are [^] the ~~second one I ever knew~~ and the only one I can talk to because you understand me and everything and won't let anybody get me. You liked the Hotel better than here, didn't you? I can tell when me and my Boyfriend go there. I feel you all over the place. Heed wants me to do something in there. She won't tell me what, but I know it's something to fix Christine for good. Dream on. The game they're playing? both lose. I just have to make sure it's not me. Or you. I don't know why I said that. I'm sorry. I'm still not used to it. Sometimes I forget you're my Good Man.