



## Chapter 9

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## CHAPTER NINE

Heed can't look. Christine has covered her feet, in perfect fourth position now, with a quilt and gone to search for something to ease the pain. There could be liquor in the bar, aspirin in a cabinet. Heed hopes for the first because there is no water and she would like to pass out from drunkenness rather than agony. Her bones, fragile and <sup>sedentary</sup> unused for decades, splinter like glass. The ankles are not the only joints she believes are cracked. There is a dullness in her pelvis and she can't lift her right leg. Christine has propped her against the wall since there is no mattress on the bed. In her wisdom, when the Hotel closed, she sold every useless thing.

Drawing a ribbon of breath, she stops <sup>any</sup> the tears <sup>may be lurking</sup> that are starting to ~~like memories~~ behind her eyelids. ~~form~~ After all these years they are back in the room they once shared. The forget-me-nots on the wall paper <sup>are</sup> less faint than her remembrance of what it

was that made her want it so. Home, she <sup>thinks</sup> ~~thought~~. When I first came in the door, I <sup>thought I</sup> ~~knew~~ it was home.

Christine's tread interrupts her efforts to remember more. She has <sup>among them</sup> hurricane candles, matches, found things: a can of Dole pineapple and some packets of Stanback powder. <sup>She lights a candle</sup> <sup>using its drippings</sup> <sup>to secure it.</sup> <sup>pineapple</sup> If she can manage to open the can, Heed can swallow the powder. Wordlessness continues as Christine <sup>s</sup> ~~used~~ a ball-peen to bang a table knife into the rim of the can. When she succeeds, she opens two packets and sifts the bitter powder into Heed's mouth, alternating it with the juice.

Heed had expected a quarrel. Whose to blame for Junior's deceit?

Whose fault <sup>is it</sup> ~~they~~ are abandoned seven miles from <sup>humanity</sup> ~~nowhere~~ with nobody knowing they are there or caring even if they know? <sup>\*</sup> Who started it all by

hiring a thief and who made it necessary by consulting a lawyer? ~~But~~ they

<sup>rehearsing</sup> avoid <sup>up here</sup> <sup>where the solitude is</sup> <sup>like in the</sup> <sup>room of a</sup> <sup>dead child,</sup> accusations, irrelevant now with one of them cracked to pieces and the other sweating like a laundress. ~~Blackness~~ <sup>bleak</sup> envelopes them. The ocean

<sup>has no</sup> <sup>without</sup> scent or roar. The future had disappeared along with the past. The <sup>landscape</sup> <sup>world</sup> beyond ~~this room~~ is without color. Just a ridge of stone and no one

to imagine it otherwise because that is the way it is as, deep down, everyone

\* No one is praying for them and they have never prayed for themselves.



*It is the unborn world*

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knows. <sup>1</sup>Where sound, any sound—the scratch of a claw, the flap of webbed feet—is a gift. Where a human voice is the only miracle. *the single necessity*

*Talk when it came, had the vigor of twenty-one years on hold, Sudden: <sup>1</sup>stripped to its underwear.*

You know May wasn't much of a mother to me.

At least she didn't sell you.

Would have if she needed the money. ~~But~~ <sup>==</sup> she didn't, so she gave me away.

Maple Valley?

Maple Valley.

I thought you wanted to go.

<sup>Hell</sup> ~~No.~~ <sup>1</sup>But so what if I did? I was thirteen. She was the mama. She wanted me gone because he did, and she wanted whatever he wanted.

Except you. She was Daddy's girl. Not you.

Don't I know it.

I bet she made your life a real playground .

Her own too. I believed for years she was hiding stuff just to devil me until I found out she was afraid Huey Newton would find them.

She thought the Panthers were after her?

Maybe she just wanted to be ready. <sup>IN CASE.</sup>

Yeah. For the real revolution: twenty year old boys fighting to bed  
sixty year old women.

They could do worse.

They did do worse.

You ever meet any?

No. I was out by then.

I thought you were crazy but I was jealous too. The excitement and  
all.

It was that.

You sound sad.

No. It's just. Well it's like we started out being sold, got free of it,  
then sold ourselves to the highest bidder.

Who do you mean 'we'? Black people? women? You mean me and  
you?

I don't know what I mean. ¶ Christine touches Heed's ankle.

Sssss. Ouch!

Sorry.



They're broke.

I'll get us out of here by morning.

*In the top drawer she finds a little cloth sack; in the middle drawer some clothing*  
Christine <sup>lights another candle</sup> stands up, and goes to the dresser, opening one drawer after another. She turns and holds up a ~~little~~ <sup>slip of</sup> piece of yellow cotton.

That's your old bathing suit.

Was anybody ever this small? Christine wipes perspiration from her face and neck with the fabric. *With difficulty she returns to Heed's side. Candle flame lights their hands but not their faces.*

Was he good to you, Heed? I mean really good?

At first. For a few years he was good to me. Mind you, at eleven I <sup>a box of</sup> thought candied popcorn was good treatment. Truth is, I've <sup>I blamed May and you for</sup> been lying to <sup>troubling my life. And when that didn't work</sup> myself about him most of my life. I blamed everything on when he started losing money and the Sheriff was breathing down his neck. *I never blamed him.\**

I remember him. ~~Buddy Silk~~. They fished together.

Fished. I'll say. Papa forgot what every pickaninny knows. Whites don't throw pennies in your cup if you ain't dancing.

You saying Buddy Silk broke him?

Not him; his son, Boss. He <sup>was friends so to speak</sup> had a good relationship with the father but the son was another breed fo dog. He did better then break him. He

\* If I always did. You could afford to. The Sheriff wasn't breathing down your neck.

let him break himself. <sup>\*</sup>A loan here, a mortgage there. Went along and went along. He had to pay, you know, to keep the place open and selling liquor. It was tight but okay. Then the old Silk died and the new one upped the premium. Papa couldn't pay the bands, the police and the liquor man too.

So how did you manage for so long?

Luck. I found some of Papa's fishing pictures.

No. ~~Papa?~~

Oh, yeah. ~~Papa.~~

Who? Where?

Who cares who? And "where" was the bunk, the deck, the pilot's chair, anyplace and anything on board. Make you think twice about what a fishing rod can catch.

Men have the shortest memories. They always want pictures.

Tr. TK

"Huh," Heed sighed <sup>picturing</sup> remembering Boss Silk. <sup>How she stood</sup> Standing there afraid, wavering from damp sweat to chill. Wondering if he wanted sex or just her humiliation; or maybe the money he'd come for <sup>plus</sup> accompanied by a

\*|| How you mean?



<sup>feel-up.</sup>  
~~proprietary~~ feel. Shame, for sure, but she <sup>didn't</sup> ~~doesn't~~ know if it includes her  
 body. In any case, she had been sold once and that was enough.

"Here's something he wanted you to have." <sup>\*</sup> ~~She~~ <sup>ed</sup> turns around so he  
<sup>could</sup> ~~can~~ open <sup>it</sup> ~~the envelope~~ in private. ~~He thinks its money. She wants him to~~  
~~think it. She turns around so he can open the envelope in private~~ <sup>and</sup> to convey  
~~her own~~ <sup>d</sup> innocence about men's business. When she hears him remove the  
<sup>said</sup> contents, she <sup>one</sup> says, "There was another envelope just like it used to be  
 around here somewhere. But it was addressed to your mother care of the  
 Harbor Journal. If I find it, should I give it to you or mail it? Want some  
 iced tea.?"

<sup>Heed describes the scene to Christine</sup>  
 Did he? Have a set for the wife?

I made that part up.

Hey, Celestial.

<sup>Oh, girl</sup> <sup>did we first start</sup>  
 When ~~have I~~ heard that?

Playing at the beach one day, when they were ten years old, they  
 heard a man call out "Hey, Celestial" to a young woman in a red sun-back  
 dress. His voice <sup>had</sup> ~~was~~ amused admiration in it, and a touch of envy. The  
 woman <sup>didn't</sup> ~~doesn't~~ look around to see who calls <sup>ed</sup> her; her profile <sup>was</sup> ~~is~~ etched

\* She handed him a brown envelope and hoped he  
 would think it was money. Then



against the seascape; her head held high. She turns<sup>ed</sup> instead to look at them. Her face is cut from <sup>cheek</sup> ~~jaw~~ to ear. A fine scar line a pencil mark an eraser could turn into a flawless face. Her eyes locking theirs <sup>were</sup> ~~are~~ cold and scary. Until she winks<sup>ed</sup> at them, <sup>making</sup> ~~causing~~ their toes ~~to~~ clench and curl with happiness. Later they ask <sup>ed</sup> May who she is, this Celestial. ~~May says~~ "Stay as far away from her as you can." <sup>"said Mayo"</sup> "Cross the road when you see her coming your way." They ask<sup>ed</sup> why and May answers<sup>ed</sup> "Because there is nothing a sporting woman won't do."

Fascinated, they <sup>tried</sup> ~~try~~ to imagine ~~her exploits~~, the things she does not hesitate to do regardless of danger. They name<sup>d</sup> their castle after her. Celestial Castle. And from then on, <sup>to say "Amen," or acknowledge</sup> ~~when one of them did~~ a particularly bold, smart, risky thing, they mimic the male voice crying "Hey, Celestial,"

Except for the words they had invented for secrets in a language they called "idigay", "Hey, Celestial" was their most private code.

insert

Did L know what was going on?

Probably.

I meant to ask you. How did she die?

How do you think? Cooking.

Frying chicken?

No. Smothered pork chops.

Here?

Maceo's. Dropped dead at the stove.

She never came back after the funeral?

Nope. I thought you'd come back for hers. Didn't May write you?

She did, but I was in a fancy apartment banging my head over <sup>that old</sup> ~~some~~ man.

The doctor?

Kenny Rio. Him whoremaster; me whore.

Bought?

Like a fifth of whiskey. <sup>And</sup> ~~Well~~ you know, At some point you have to buy more. I lasted three years.

You were nobody's liquor.

Neither were you.

What were we then? ~~Just~~ <sup>F</sup>fools?

No. Just women. Trying to find a place when the streets don't go



there.

I miss her.

Me too. Always have.

We could have been doing something worthwhile instead of looking for Big Daddy everywhere.

Especially since he was everywhere. And nowhere. Like a ghost.

One we made up.

We didn't make him up.

Hey, Celestial.

Even in their <sup>idagay</sup> private language they had never been able to share a certain

twin shame. Each one thought the rot was hers alone. Now, sitting on the floor <sup>trying to brave the body's betrayal</sup> playing jacks, with everything and nothing to lose, the phrase, ~~the~~

recollection of the moment of invention, <sup>loosened something</sup>, Took them

<sup>once again</sup> back to a time when innocence did not exist because no one <sup>had dreamed 'up</sup> remembered

hell.

It is 1940 and they are going by themselves to play at the beach. L

has packed a picnic lunch for them <sup>as always</sup> and they will eat it in the shade and

## Celestial Palace

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privacy of their ~~palace~~: a keeled over row boat long abandoned to sea grass. They have cleaned it, furnished it and named it. It contains a blanket, a driftwood table, two broken saucers and emergency food: canned peaches, sardines, a jar of apple jelly, peanut butter, soda crackers. They are wearing bathing suits. Heed is wearing one of Christine's, blue with white piping. Christine's is a yellow two piece, midriff, it is called. Their hair has been quartered into four braids so they have identical hair styles. Christine's braids are slippery, Heed's are not. They are walking across the hotel lawn when one remembers that they have forgotten the jacks. Heed volunteers to get them while Christine waits in the gazebo and guards the food.

Heed runs into the service entrance and up the back stairs, excited by the picnic to come and the flavor of her bubble gum. Music is coming from the hotel bar--something so sweet and urgent Heed shakes her hips to the beat as she moves down the hallway. She bumps into her friend's grandfather. He looks at her. Embarrassed--did he see her wiggle her hips?--and in awe. He is the handsome giant <sup>who</sup> owns the hotel, ~~Whom~~ nobody, ~~not even Christine,~~ sasses. Heed stops, unable to move or say



"Excuse me. Sorry."

He speaks. "Where's the fire?"

She doesn't answer. Her tongue is trying to shift the bubble gum.

He speaks again. "You Johnson's girl?"

The reference to her father helps and her tongue loosens. "Yes, sir."

He nods. "What they call you?"

"Heed, sir." Then, "Heed the Night."

He smiles. "I should. I really should."

"Sir?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

He touches her chin, and then, casually, still smiling, her nipple or rather the place under her swim suit where a nipple will be if the circled dot on her chest ever changes. Heed stands there for what seems an hour but is less than the time it takes to blow a perfect bubble. He watches the pink ease from her mouth then moves away still smiling. Heed bolts back down the stairs. The spot on her chest she didn't know she had is burning, tingling. When she reaches the door, she is panting as though she has run the length of the beach instead of a flight of stairs. May grabs her from

behind and scolds her about running through the hotel. Orders Heed to help carry sacks of soiled bed linen through to the laundry. It takes only a minute or two, but May Cosey has things to tell her about public behavior. When she is finished telling Heed how happy they all are that she and Christine are friends and what that friendship can teach her, Heed runs to tell Christine what happened, what her grandfather did. But Christine is not in the gazebo. Heed finds her behind the hotel at the rain barrel. Christine has spilled something on her bathing suit that looks like puke. Her face is hard, flat. She looks sick, disgusted and doesn't meet Heed's eyes. ~~Again~~ ~~that look of disgust~~. Heed can't speak, can't tell her friend what happened. In silence they go on their picnic. Heed knows she has spoiled it, spoiled it all. And although they fall into the routine: using other names, spreading the food, the game of jacks cannot be played because Heed doesn't have them. She tells Christine she could not find them. That first lie, of many to follow, is born because Heed thinks Christine knows what happened and it made her vomit. So there is something wrong with Heed. The old man saw it right away so all he had to do was touch her and it moved as he knew it would because the wrong was already there, waiting for a finger to bring it



to life. And she had started it—not him. The hip-wriggling came first—then him. Now Christine knows it's there too, and can't look at her because the wrong thing shows.

She does not know that Christine has left the gazebo to meet her friend at the service entrance. No one is there. Christine looks up toward the window of her own bedroom where Heed would be looking for the jacks. The window is open, ~~the~~ pale curtains lift through it. She opens her mouth to call out, "Heed! Come on!" But she doesn't because her grandfather is standing there, in her bedroom window, his trousers open, his wrist moving with the same speed L used to beat egg whites into unbelievable creaminess. He doesn't see Christine because his eyes are closed. Christine covers her mouth to laugh, but takes it away immediately because her breakfast is flowing into her palm. She rushes to the rain barrel to rinse the sick from her yellow top, her hands and her bare feet.

When Heed finds her, Christine doesn't explain the bathing suit, why she is wiping it, or why she can't look at Heed.

It wasn't the arousals, not altogether unpleasant, that the girls could not talk about. It was the other thing. The thing that made each believe,

without knowing why, that this particular shame was different and could not <sup>allow</sup> ~~hear~~ speech—not even in the language ~~they had~~ invented especially for secrets.

Would the inside dirtiness leak?

When Christine went to bed that night, her grandfather's shadow had booked the room. She did not have to glance at the window or see the curtains yield before a breeze to know that an old man's solitary pleasure lurked there. A pleasure deeply private and separate but connected to her like a guest with a long held reservation arriving in your room at last, a guest you knew would stay.

~~Even now~~, <sup>Exhausted,</sup> drifting toward <sup>a maybe</sup> permanent sleep, they don't <sup>say of the birth of</sup> ~~say it, directly.~~ <sup>since</sup>  
~~Idigay~~ can't help them <sup>with that</sup> ~~now~~. Besides each one knows what the other one knows. When and where the first lie began.

Look what I found. Christine holds up <sup>the</sup> a tiny sack, then empties its <sup>spilling</sup> ~~contents on the floor.~~ <sup>on the floor.</sup> Five jacks and a rubber ball. She <sup>retrieves</sup> fans out the five, <sup>and fans them out</sup> ~~and takes one ring from each finger to complete the set.~~ <sup>Heed can't</sup> ~~and takes one ring from each finger to complete the set.~~ <sup>and fans them out</sup>  
 bounce the ball but her fingers are perfect for scooping. \*

Hating you was the only thing my mother liked about me.

\* 'Stars and jewels sparkling in fish candlelight'



I heard it was two hundred dollars he gave my daddy, and a pocket book for my mama.

But you wanted to, didn't you? Didn't you want to? Christine <sup>scoops four quickly then</sup>groans.

The pain in her shoulder is spreading down her arm.

I wanted to be with you. Married to him I thought I would be.

We had Baby Ruths in the basket.

And lemonade.

No seeds, either. L spooned out the seeds.

Was that baloney or ham?

Ham, girl. L wouldn't go near baloney.

~~I still miss her.~~

Did it rain? Seem to remember rain.

Fire flies. That's what I remember.

You wanted to bottle them.

You wouldn't let me.

The turtles scared us.

You're crying.

So are you.

Am I?

Uh huh.

I can barely hear you

Hold my...my hand.

He took all my childhood away from me, girl.

He took all of you away from me.

The sky, remember? When the sun went down?

Sand. It turned pale blue.

And the stars. Just a few at first.

Then so many they lit the whole fucking world.

Pretty. So damn pretty.

Love ~~you~~. I really do.

No one answers when he calls out, "Anybody here?" Guided by the weak beam of a flashlight, Romen searches the lobby, the kitchen and then the rooms. It will be daylight soon, but now everything is hidden. He hears a light snoring to his left through a half open door. He pushes it wide and



dapples the beam over the two women. He comes closer. Both look asleep but only <sup>e</sup>is breathing. One is lying on her back, left arm akimbo; the other woman has wrapped the right arm <sup>of the dead one</sup> around her own neck and is snoring into the other's shoulder. As he pours light into her face, she stirs, focuses, and says, "You're late," as though they had an appointment. As though stealing the care <sup>g</sup> was not an impulse but an errand she had assigned him. As though what Junior told him hadn't mattered.

"Look what I got." Junior was propped in Heed's bed under that man's picture. Naked, waving a folded sheet of paper. Romen hadn't looked at it.

"Where's Miss Cosey?"

"Visiting her granddaughter," Junior was laughing.

"What granddaughter?"

"Come here," she said, throwing back the covers. "Take your clothes off and get in here."

"She'll catch us."

"Uh uh. Not a chance. Come on!"

Afterwards, he sat on the edge of the bed, letting her rub his back.

"Serious," he said. "Where are they?"

"At the hotel."

"What for?"

Then she told him.

"You left them there?"

"Why not?"

Romen was reaching to turn off the lamp but found himself picking up the car keys instead. He stood up then and dressed. Whatever Junior was saying, screaming at his over-caressed back he couldn't decipher. He ran ~~out~~<sup>g</sup>-fast. As he started the car he remembers<sup>ed</sup> the deep voice of an old man. "You not helpless, Roman. Don't ever think that." Stupid. He was trying to warn him, make him listen, tell him that the old Roman, the sniveling one who couldn't help untying shoe laces from an unwilling girl's wrist was more man than the one who couldn't help flinging a willing girl around an attic.

Slower, he thought. Slower. The road has no shoulders. Ditches beckoned on either side.

He has to carry them both. One at a time, at a time down the stairs. Tucking the dead one into the wide back seat; helping the other one into the



front.

"She gone?"

"No Mam. She's at the house." \*

When they arrive light is finally breaking. The windows are glazed peach; the house inhales the damp air, its siding juicy with moisture.

Roman carries her down the steps into the kitchen, <sup>Before he can seather</sup> Junior rushes in—all big eyed and apprehensive.

"Oooo I'm so glad. I tried to get help and couldn't find anybody then Roman came by and <sup>h</sup> made him go out there right away. You all right?"

<sup>Alive</sup>  
"I'm fine."

"I'll make some coffee, should I?"

"No. Go in there and shut the door." Leaning heavily, <sup>an</sup> ~~one~~ arm bent in Romen's, a hand clutching the back of a chair, she nods towards L's old rooms.

Junior looks at Roman. He looks back, thinking something is draining from her. Junior frowns the <sup>h</sup> turns and, looking all the while at the floor, <sup>goes into</sup> enters the room.

"Lock it," she tells Romen. "The key is in the bread box."

\* She won't let him go to the hospital, insisting he drive to her house.

He helps her sit, then locks the door.

"You got to take her to the mortuary. Find a phone and get an ambulance out here. Make haste,"

Romen turns to leave.

"Wait," she says. "Thank you, Romen. Everything left in me thanks you."

"Yes, Mam," he says and heads for the door.

"Wait," she says again. "Take a blanket. She might get cold."

Outside the house Romen looks back. The windows of 1 Post Road glint. Or was that a wink?