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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 from decades of stupor, <sup>have</sup> splinter <sup>ed</sup> 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 <sup>possible</sup> ~~useless~~ thing.

Drawing a ribbon of breath, she blocks any tears that may be lurking like memories behind her eyelids. ~~After all these years they are back in the room they once shared.~~ <sup>roaming</sup> The forget-me-nots on the wall paper <sup>are more vivid in</sup> can't be less ~~this deliberate dark than~~ they ever were in daylight and she wonders

~~faint than her remembrance~~ of what it was that made her want it so. Home, she thinks. When I first ~~came in~~ <sup>stepped through</sup> the door, I thought I was home.

Christine's tread interrupts her efforts to remember more. She has found things: among them matches, a box of hurricane candles, a can of Dole pineapple and some packets of Stanback powder. She lights a candle securing it in its own drippings. If she can manage to open the pineapple, Heed can swallow the powder. Wordlessness continues as Christine uses 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. <sup>She pulls the quilt up because Heed is shivering.</sup> <sup>They both</sup> Heed had expected a quarrel. Whose to blame for Junior's deceit?

Who started it all by hiring a thief and who made it necessary by consulting a lawyer? Whose fault is it they are abandoned seven miles from humanity with nobody knowing they are there or caring even if they <sup>do</sup> ~~did~~ know? No one is praying for them and they have never prayed for themselves. <sup>Still</sup> ~~But~~ they avoid rehearsing accusations, irrelevant now with one of them cracked to pieces and the other sweating like a laundress. Up here where the solitude is like the room of a dead child, the ocean has no scent or roar. The future



<sup>s</sup>  
~~had~~ disappeared along with the past. The landscape beyond is without  
 color. Just a bleak ridge of stone and no one to imagine it otherwise  
 because that is the way it is as, deep down, everyone knows. An unborn  
 world 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 and the <sup>sole</sup> only  
 necessity. Talk, when finally it comes, has the vigor of <sup>a felon pardoned after</sup> twenty-one years on  
 hold. Sudden, <sup>raw,</sup> stripped to its underwear.

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

At least she didn't sell you.

<sup>No.</sup>  
~~Would have if she needed the money. She didn't, so~~ she gave me  
 away.

Maple Valley?

Maple Valley.

I thought you wanted to go.

Hell no. 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.

horror movie.  
I bet she made your life a ~~real~~ playground.

Her own too. I believed for years she was hiding stuff just to devil me.  
I didn't know it was ~~until I found out she was afraid Huey Newton would find them.~~ she was scared of.

She thought the Panthers were after her?  
Among others.  
She wanted to be ready. In case.

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.  
of it

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

had  
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. *The UNSWOLLEN one.*

Sssss. ~~Ouch!~~

Sorry.

It's broke. *too, I guess.*

I'll get us out of here by morning.

Christine lights another candle, *heaves herself* stands up and *wanders* goes to the dresser,

opening one drawer after another. In the top one she finds a *Small* ~~little~~ cloth *pouch*, some crayons, *mouse scat* and the remnants of a child's underwear: socks, a slip ~~sack~~; in the middle one ~~some moth-eaten clothes.~~ *Panties* She turns and holds up a *She takes out a pale yellow top, and holds it up for Heed to see.* piece of yellow cotton.

That's your ~~old~~ bathing suit.

Was anybody ever this small? *Amine is there* Christine wipes perspiration from her *Don't see it.* face and neck with the fabric. *and throws it on the floor* She returns to Heed and *with difficulty.* ~~With difficulty she~~ seats herself at Heed's ~~her~~ side. Candleflame 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 thought a box of candied popcorn was good treatment. Truth is, I relied on May and you to explain my troubles. And when that didn't work I

blamed everything on when he started losing money. I never blamed him.

I always did.

You could afford to. The sheriff wasn't breathing down your neck.

I remember him. They fished together.

Fished. I'll say. <sup>He</sup> ~~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 was friends so to speak with the father but the son was another breed <sup>to</sup> ~~to~~ dog. He did better <sup>at</sup> ~~then~~ break him. He let him break <sup>his</sup> ~~him~~ self.

How you mean?

A loan here, a mortgage there. Went along and went along. He had to pay, you know, to <sup>stay</sup> ~~keep the place~~ open and selling liquor. It was tight but okay. Then the old Silk died and the new one upped the <sup>fee,</sup> ~~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.

Oh, yeah.

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.

Huh. Heed sighed picturing Boss Silk. Herself 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 plus a <sup>little feel,</sup> ~~proprietary feel-up~~. <sup>he wanted</sup> Shame, for sure, but she didn't know if it included her <sup>fits</sup> ~~body~~. In any case, she had been sold once and that was enough.

"Here's something he wanted you to have." She handed him a brown envelope and hoped he would think it was money. Then turned <sup>her back</sup> ~~around~~ so he could open it in private and to convey her own ignorance about men's business. When she heard him remove the contents, she said, "By the way there's another envelope used to be around here somewhere. But it was addressed to your mother care of the Harbor Journal. If I find it, should I



to them  
 give it to <sup>her</sup>you or mail it? Want some iced tea?"

<sup>dramatizes her speech to the sheriff</sup>  
 Heed describes the scene to Christine.

They chuckle.

Did he? Have a set for the wife?

Mammy accent,  
 with bulging Mammy  
 eyes,

I made that part up.

Hey, Celestial.

Aw, girl. When did we first start 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 had <sup>humor</sup>amused admiration in it, and a <sup>deeply private knowing along with a</sup> touch of envy. The  
 woman didn't look around to see who called her. Her profile was etched  
 against the seascape; her head held high. She turned instead to look at  
 them. Her face was cut from cheek to ear. A ~~fine scar line~~ a pencil mark  
 an eraser could turn into a flawless face. Her eyes locking theirs were cold  
 and scary, <sup>making</sup>Until she winked at them, causing their toes to clench and curl  
 with happiness. Later they asked May who she is, this Celestial. "Stay as  
 far away from her as you can," May said. "Cross the road when you see  
 her coming your way." They asked why and May answered "Because there  
 is nothing a sporting woman won't do."

Fascinated, they tried to imagine the things she does not hesitate to do regardless of danger. They named their <sup>play house</sup> ~~castle~~ after her. Celestial Castle.

And from then on, to say "Amen," or acknowledge a particularly bold, smart, risky thing, they mimiced<sup>k</sup> the male voice crying "Hey, Celestial,"

Except for the words they had invented for secrets in a language they called "idagay", "Hey, Celestial" was their most private code. Idagay was for intimacy, gossip, <sup>Jokes on grown-ups,</sup> ~~having fun~~. Only once was it used to draw friendly blood. ou-yidagay a ave-slidagay! E-hidagay ought-bidagay ou-yidagay ith-widagay a ears-yidagay ent-ridagay an-didagay a andy-cidagay ar-bidagay!

Ave-slidagay. That hurt, Christine. Calling me a slave. Hurt bad.

It was meant to. I thought I would die.

Poor us.

What the hell was on his mind?

Search me.

<sup>Said! Bingo! Then I took up with.</sup>  
When he died I ~~must have mourned him the loss, I mean, because I~~  
~~found~~ somebody just like him. Old, selfish, skirt chas<sup>ing</sup>.

You could have stayed her<sup>e</sup> if that's what you wanted to be around.



He had so many women I lost count.

Bother you?

Sure.

Did L know what was going on?

*out on his boat*

Probably.

I meant to ask you. How did she die?

How 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 ~~that~~ <sup>SOME</sup> *phoney*

rascal.

The doctor?

Kenny Rio. ~~Him-whoremaster; me-whore.~~

Bought?



Like a fifth of whiskey. And, <sup>well,</sup> you know, at some point you have to buy more. I lasted three years. *Miss Cutty Sark.*

You were nobody's liquor.

Neither were you.

What ~~were we~~ then? 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 idagay they had never been able to share a certain twin shame.

Each one thought the rot was hers alone. Now, sitting on the floor braving

\* I used to say that  
She disapproved of us.  
We disapproved of us.

<sup>treason</sup>  
 the body's ~~betrayal~~, with everything and nothing to lose, <sup>the phrase takes</sup> ~~took~~ <sup>1</sup> them back  
 once again to a time when innocence did not exist because no one had  
 dreamed up hell.

It is 1940 and they are going by themselves to play at the beach. L  
 has packed a picnic lunch for them and as always they will eat it in the  
 shade and privacy of Celestial 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 who owns the hotel who nobody 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. 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, <sup>made-up</sup> using ~~other~~ names, <sup>arranging</sup> 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; 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 <sup>laughing</sup> 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. *She is ashamed of her grandfather and herself.*

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 tolerate speech—not even in the language they had invented 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.

*Now* Exhausted, drifting toward a maybe permanent sleep, they don't speak of the birth of sin. Idagay can't help them with that. ~~Besides each~~ *(cover)* ~~one knows what the other one knows: when and where the first lie began.~~

Look what I found. Christine holds up the cloth ~~sack~~ *a little pouch and* then empties it, spilling five jacks and a rubber ball on the floor. She collects the five and fans them out. Too few for a game, so she takes one ring from each finger



If Heed needs more Stanback and coughs  
when she swallows it. A rasping cough that  
takes a long time to quiet.

Where does it hunt?

Name it.

it'll be light soon.

Then what?

I'll carry you.

Yeah, sure

to complete the set. Heed can't bounce the ball but her fingers are perfect  
for scooping. Stars <sup>Mixed with</sup> and jewels sparkle in fresh candle light.

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

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 scoops  
four quickly then 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.

Do I? We had Baby Ruths in the basket.

(over)

And lemonade.

No seeds, either. L spooned out the seeds.

Was that baloney or ham?

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

Did it rain? Seem to remember rain.

Fire flies. That's what I remember.

You wanted to bottle them.

You wouldn't let me.



¶ I wanted to go on your honeymoon.

Wish you had.

How was the sex?

Okay, I guess. Couldn't tell. Nothing to compare it to.

Never?

Once.

Hey Celestial.

Remember our picnics?

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. I really do.

*Ush-hidagay. Ush-hidagay.*

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 one is breathing. One is lying on her back, left arm akimbo; the other woman has wrapped the right arm of the dead one 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 car 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 <sup>got</sup> dressed. Whatever Junior was saying, screaming, at his over-caressed back he couldn't decipher. He ran-fast, down the stairs, out the door chasing the whisper 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 <sup>better,</sup> 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. One headlight blinked and died.

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."

She won't let him go to the hospital, insisting he drive to 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. Before he can seat her 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 I made him go out there right away. You all right?"

"Alive."

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

"No. Go in there and shut the door." Leaning heavily, her arm bent in Roman'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 then turns and, looking all the while at the floor, goes in the room and shuts the door.

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

He helps her into the chair, 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. Friendly looking clouds sail over the roof of 1 Post Road shadowing all but one window—that glints.