



"Heed can't look..."

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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 all sorts of items sequestered by May: liquor in a toilet tank, aspirin in a flue. 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, have splintered 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 thing possible.

Drawing a ribbon of breath, she blocks any tears that may be lurking

like memories behind her eyelids. But the forget-me-nots roaming the wall paper are more vivid in this deliberate dark than they ever were in daylight and she wonders what it was that made her want it so. Home, she thinks. When I stepped in the door, I thought I was home.

Christine's familiar 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 stud nail 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. She pulls the quilt up around her shoulders because Heed is shivering.

They both had expected a quarrel. Who's to blame? 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 do know? No one is praying for them and they have never prayed for themselves. Still they avoid

rehearsing accusations, a waste of breath 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 15 disintegrating along with the past. The landscape beyond this room 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 only necessity. Language, when finally it comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold. Sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear.

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

At least she didn't sell you.

No, 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.

I bet she made your life a horror movie .

Her own too. For years I believed she was hiding stuff just to devil
me. I didn't know it was Huey Newton 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 of it by then.

Was it worth it?

No question.

I called you a fool, but I was jealous too. The excitement and all.

It had 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 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.

Sorry.

It's broke too, I guess.

I'll get us out of here by morning.

Christine lights another candle, heaves herself up and crosses to the dresser, opening one drawer after another. In the top one she finds crayons, a small cloth pouch; in the middle one mice scat and the remnants of a child's underwear : socks, a slip, panties. She pulls out a pale yellow top and holds it up for Heed to see.

That's your bathing suit.

Was anybody ever this small?

Mine in there?

Don't see it. Christine wipes perspiration from her face and neck with the fabric then tosses it on the floor. She moves back to Heed and seats herself with difficulty at 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. He scrubbed my feet til the soles was like butter.

Damn.

So when things got bad I relied on May and you to explain it. 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. He 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 of dog. He did better then break him. He let him break hisself.

How you mean?

A little loan here, a bigger one there. Went along and went along. He had to pay, you know, to stay open and sell liquor in the place. It was tight but okay. Then the old Silk died and the new one upped the fees. We couldn't pay the bands, the police and the liquor man too.

How'd you manage for so long?

Luck. I found some fishing pictures.

Heed gives Christine a look.

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 quick feel. Shame he wanted, for sure, but she didn't know if it included her tits. 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 her back to let him 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 give it to her or mail it to them? Want some iced tea, suh.?"

Heed recounts the meeting in Mammy accent with bulging Mammy eyes. They chuckle.

Did he? Have a set for the wife?

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 humor in it, a kind of private knowing along with a 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 like a pencil mark an eraser could turn into a flawless face. Her eyes locking theirs were cold and scarey, until she winked at them making 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 play house after her. Celestial Palace. And from then on, to say "Amen," or acknowledge a particularly bold, smart, risky thing, they mimicked 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, telling jokes on grown ups. 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.

When he died I said Bingo! Then right away took up with somebody just like him. Old, selfish, skirt chasing.

You could have stayed here if that's what you wanted to be tied to. 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?

Uh uh. Smothering pork chops.

Where?

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 some rat.

The doctor?

Kenny Rio.

Bought?

Like a fifth of whiskey. And, well, 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 then? Fools?

Women. Trying to find a place when the streets don't go there.

L used to say that.

She disapproved of us.

We disapproved of us.

I miss her.

Me too. Always have.

We could have been living 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

the body's treason, with everything and nothing to lose, the phrase takes 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 ^{and} 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. She knows she has spoiled it all. In silence they go on their picnic. And although they fall into the routine—using made-up names, arranging 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 thumb to bring it to life. And she had started it—not him. The hip-wiggling 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 laughing mouth, but yanks her hand away when her breakfast flows 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. When she went to bed that night, his 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. Like a guest with a long held reservation arriving in your room at last, a guest you knew would stay.

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?

Now, exhausted, drifting toward a maybe permanent sleep, they don't speak of the birth of sin. Idagay can't help them with that.

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

Where does it hurt?

Name it.

Be light soon.

Then what?

I'll carry you.

Yeah, sure.

Hey! Look what I found.

Christine holds up the pouch and 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. She takes enough rings from her fingers to complete the set. Stars mixed with jewels sparkle in fresh candle light. Heed can't bounce the ball but her fingers are perfect for scooping.

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 mama.

But you wanted to, didn't you? Didn't you want to?

Quickly Christine scoops four then groans. The thorn in her shoulder is traveling down her arm.

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

I wanted to go on your honeymoon.

Wish you had.

How was the sex?

Seemed like fun at the time. Couldn't tell. Nothing to compare it to.

Never?

Once.

Hey Celestial.

I'd just as soon our picnics. Member?

Do I. 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.

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 so pretty.

Love. I really do.

Ush-hidagay. Ush-hidagay.

In un-lit places without street lamps or yelping neon, night is profound and often comes as ease. Relief from looking out for and away from. Thieves need the night in order to be furtive, but can't enjoy it. Mothers wait for it yet are braced all through their sleeping. The main ingredient offered

by the night is escape from watching and watchers alike. Artlessly, like stars free to make their own history and not care about another one; or like diamonds unburdened, released into handsome rock.

No one answers when he calls out, "Anybody here?" Guided by the weak beam of a flashlight, Romen crosses the lobby and climbs the stairs. 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 two women. He comes closer. Both look asleep but only one is breathing. One is lying on her back, left arm akimbo; the other 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.

He had been laying in the bed thinking about getting something to eat when she told him.

"You left them there?"

"Why not?...turn out the light, sugarboy."

Romen was reaching to turn off the lamp but found himself scooping up the car keys instead. He stood up then and dressed. Whatever Junior was saying, shouting, 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 hipper 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 Monarch Street.

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 Romen came by and I made him go out there right away. You all right?"

"Alive."

"I'll make some coffee, should I? Where is...?"

"Get in there and shut the door." Leaning heavily, her 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 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."

Alone, seated at the table, she speaks to the friend of her life ^{waiting to be} ~~being~~
driven ~~now~~ to the morgue.

I bet she thinks up a way to get out before the ambulance gets here.

No she won't.

Well, she'll start yelling then. Think she's shamed?

Ought to be.

Should we let her stay, little rudderless, homeless girl?

Under certain circumstances.

Hey, Celestial.

Romen returns with a blanket. "I'll be right back," he says. "Don't worry," he says and steps through the door.

"Cover her," she says, stroking the key with her thumb.

Outside the house Romen looks back. Friendly looking clouds sail over the roof of One Monarch Street, their big-headed profiles shadowing all but one window—that keeps its peachy glint.