



## God Help the Child Draft

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M. b heads  
J. Chap  
(Part 1 only)



Corrections  
on Computer

# PART ONE

She slept with him for six months. Then he said, "You not the woman I want."

"Neither am I," she answered and as soon as she heard her own words it was as though she had made bail. As though she had spent <sup>those</sup> ~~two~~ months in a holding cell without arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge <sup>called</sup> ~~put~~ the whole thing off—dismissed the case or refused to hear it at all. <sup>She did not</sup> ~~It never occurred to her to protest, to~~ whine, wail or accuse. He said one thing; she agreed. Which was not to say the affair hadn't been pleasant, even thrilling at times. But it wasn't spectacular or even the mildly dangerous sex she <sup>occasionally</sup> ~~enjoyed~~.

Certainly it was nothing

~~Nor was it~~ like those double page spreads in magazines of couples

standing half naked in surf, fierce and frowning with sexual lightening

beneath a sky re-adjusting itself to the shine of their skin. Nor had

the affair measured up to any old R and B song—some red and black

tune with a beat arranged to accommodate fever, <sup>Nor</sup> or even the tearful

lyrics of 1930's blues: 'Baby, baby, why you treat me so. I do any

thing you say, go any where you want me to go." <sup>(over)</sup> She had not even

looked through the windows at the walkway beneath her condo when

he left. Instead she opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and sank into the

sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms. <sup>(over)</sup> In a few

minutes she would call Norma, tell her all about it. Or not. Probably

not. There was too much going on at work and she shouldn't distract

her best friend and colleague with personal gossip about another

breakup. Especially now. Being a Regional Manager was being a

captain and she had to maintain the right relationship with the crew.

The company she worked for, Sylvia Inc., was a small but

blossoming business making waves, finally, and shedding its frumpy

Why she was comparing the affair  
to magazine spreads and music  
She wasn't sure, but it <sup>amused</sup> ~~pleased~~ her to  
~~settle on~~  
~~She thought rather it had the kick of~~  
"I wanna dance with somebody!"  
as ~~the most~~ its kick.

Almost. Because he was beautiful,  
flawless except for the <sup>small</sup> burn scar  
on his shoulder - a plum-red blob  
with a tail ~~which he avoided explaining~~  
Oh, well

past. What used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women had changed its name in the fifties to Sylvia Apparel, then <sup>to</sup> Sylvia Inc before going hip with cosmetics including six brand new ones including YOU, Girl: Cosmetics for your Personal Millennium. It was a line for but not limited to African Americans of all complexions from ebony to lemonade <sup>to milk.</sup> That was hers, all hers—the idea, the name, the packaging. With that slam-dunk, regional manager was hers without contest. And her salary told the tale.

"How you like that, Lula Ann?"

She smiled at the lipstick smile on the wine glass. Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lula Ann Bridewell was not available. Lula Ann was a seventeen-year old girl who dropped the name right after high school and was Ann Bride for two years until she interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia Inc. and began calling herself Bride with nothing anybody needed to say before or after that one sweet syllable. Customers and the reps liked it, but he did not. He called her 'baby' most of the time. "Hey, baby." "Come on, baby."

And sometimes, "You my girl" accent on 'my.' The only time he said 'woman' was the day he left.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you. No more dallying with a mystery man with no visible means of support. A felon if ever there was one, though he denied it, said his weekly appointments downtown were not reports to a probation officer or drug re-hab. Yet he never said what they were. She told him every single thing about herself; he confided nothing so she filled in the spaces with tv plots: he was ex-CIA, an informant with a new identity, a disbarred lawyer. Whatever.

Actually, the timing of his departure was perfect. With him gone, out of her thoughts and her apartment she could ~~not only~~ concentrate fully on the launch of YOU, Girl, she could keep the promise she'd made to herself long <sup>ago</sup> ~~before she met him~~ <sup>AND</sup> <sup>in spite of</sup> him. According to [prisoninfo.gov/paroleboard/calendar](http://prisoninfo.gov/paroleboard/calendar) it was time.

Sunday afternoon was rainy in the city, but as she drove farther north the summer sky became flawless. Bride selected a classical music station for the two-hour drive but didn't raise the volume.

Aida's cries muted by the Jaguar's soft hides were precisely suited to her already racing pulse. She had planned this excursion for a year, choosing carefully what a <sup>paroled convict</sup> ~~freed felon~~ would need. Twenty-five

thousand dollars cash, a three thousand Continental Airlines gift certificate and a promotion box of YOU, Girl tucked into a Louis Vuitton shopping bag could take you almost anywhere. Comfort you, anyway. Help you forget. Take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness and boredom. (2)

One ought to be able to enjoy scenery this spectacular, thought Bride, but on highways <sup>50</sup> thick with lanes, exits, parallel roads, overpasses, <sup>cautionary</sup> signals and signs <sup>(over) ①</sup> were so thick it was like reading a newspaper while driving. <sup>turned Aida</sup> Once the rain turned to sprinkle Bride ~~clicked the windshield wipers off~~ and slowed. From past experience she knew the Norristown exit could be easily missed and the prison

the day after they quarreled about  
② It was ~~when~~ she described her obligation ~~to~~  
~~him~~ that he ~~turned~~<sup>pursed</sup> his lips and fled. Bride's  
was<sup>it</sup> her Good Samaritan gesture that threatened his  
ego? A passion not ~~produced~~<sup>directed toward</sup> by him? If so - good  
riddance

① Along with Amber, <sup>alerts</sup> Silver and Gold ones  
~~had~~ surfaced

not help registering how much those features would benefit from Miracle, or better still, how Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would restore needed color to the whey colored skin.

Bride stepped out of the Jaguar, not sure of anything but the absolute necessity of being there. Not wondering or caring if Sofia recognized her, she slid into the moment and spoke.

"Need a lift?"

A quick glance at the speaker followed by an intense one searching the road.

"No. Thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is tremble-y now, Bride noticed. It used to be hard, a straight razor ready to slice a child. A collagen shot and Tango-matte, not glitter, would have softened it, influenced the jury in her favor, maybe, except there was no YOU, Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi." Sofia was answering a stranger, dutifully, as though used to it. No 'what's it to you?' or even 'who the hell are you?' But going on to explain further. "Called a cab. I mean the Desk did."

Bride was moving closer to touch her elbow, prelude to convincing her not to waste what little money she had, when the cab rolled up. Fast as a bullet, limber as an acrobat, Sofia sped to the door, tossed in her little carrier bag and followed it.

"Wait!" called Bride. "Please wait." But Sofia, speaking close to the driver's ear, ignored her. The taxi drove off negotiating the U turn like a NASCAR pro. She must be meeting someone, thought Bride.

It wasn't at all hard to follow them. Bride even passed the taxi into the practically empty parking lot and squinted through the motel's rear view mirror in a playful attempt to deceive. It didn't work. In the rear view mirror Bride saw the taxi slow then turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp ahead. Shoulder gravel splayed with Bride's effort to brake,

reverse and catch up as she murmured "Mrs. Huxley. Mrs. Huxley, don't."

She followed the taxi at a respectable distance glancing every now and then at the colorful houses along the road. They were built, obviously in the fifties and added on repeatedly—a closed side porch, an archway leading from a side door to a garage expanded to accommodate two cars—until each resembled a kindergarten drawing sitting quietly in its wide lawn. Pale blue, white or yellow with pine green or beet-red doors seemed to be the preferred color scheme. A mall as pale and sad as 'lite' beer announced the entrance to the town. Just beyond it, where a road sign identified Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant, the taxi turned in. Bride slid the Jaguar into the <sup>almost</sup> practically empty parking lot and squinted through the motel's plate glass, thinking, she really is meeting some one. Well, maybe not. After a few minutes at the check-in desk, Sofia Huxley turned and showing no interest in her room assignment, went straight into the restaurant and took a seat by the window. Like a remedial or

English-as-a-second language student she studied the menu, lip reading while running her finger under the offerings. Watching her Bride shook her head remembering that this was the woman who once taught first graders to cut apples into rings to resemble the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell BOY—whom she liked best according to the women whispering in front of the sinks in the courthouse ladies room. Maybe she preferred an alphabet she could eat. Fruit had figured centrally at the trial, and as Bride watched the waitress place dish after dish before her customer, she wondered what a convicted felon's first post prison meal would contain. Sofia was eating like a refugee, never taking her eyes from the food, stabbing, slicing scooping helter-skelter all over the table. She drank no water, buttered no bread as though such acts would delay the speed eating she was committed to. The gobbling took all of eleven minutes. Then she paid, left and hurried down the walkway. With key in hand, tote bag on her shoulder Sofia hesitated. Suddenly she darted into a narrow break between two

stucco blocks of rooms. Bride abandoned her post and ran after her, pausing mid stride when a retching sound clarified Sofia's motive. Backing away, Bride hid behind a lone SUV until <sup>her prey</sup> Sofia collected herself and unlocked the door to 3B.

The knocking should be strong, Bride decided, authoritative, to get the automatically obedient response an ex-con was trained to.

"Yes?"

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door please."

"I'm sort of sick."

"I know. Open the door." Bride's voice was a combination of power-to-fire-you with a hint of administrative understanding—the tone that worked on insecure and/or unproductive reps. Sofia opened the door wide and stood there barefoot, a towel in her hand.

"Yes?"

"We need to talk," said Bride.

"Talk?"

Still no 'Who are you?' Leading with the Louis Vuitton bag, Bride pushed past her. The odor of Wizard, Rain Forest was overwhelming.

"You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nodded, a tiny flash of fear in her eyes.

"Let's sit down. I have something for you." Bride held up the shopping bag. Sofia didn't look at it. She gazed instead at Bride's shoes, the high lethal heels, the dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?"

Such a soft accommodating voice. Knowing after fifteen years that nothing was free. Nobody gave away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it was: cigarettes, magazines, tampons, stamps, stationery, Mars Bars or a jar of peanut butter, it came with strings tough as fishing line.

"Nothing. I don't want you to do a thing."

Sofia's gaze traveled up to Bride's knees poking out from a skirt cut from a yard and a half of white Egyptian cotton, not enough to cover the head of a mullah. When her eyes met Bride's they were opaque, no inquiry at all reflected there, so Bride answered the question a normal person would have posed.

"I saw you leave Decagon. No one was there to meet you. I offered you a lift."

"That was you?"

"Yes."

"Do I know you?"

"My name is Bride."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No, but look what I brought you." Bride hoisted the shopping bag onto the bed spread and reached inside it. On top of the gift

package of YOU, Girl she laid two envelopes, one slim with an airline certificate, a fatter one with the hundred dollar bills totaling twenty-five thousand. Not much if you thought of it as one thousand dollars for each year had she served her full sentence.

"What's that for?" Sofia looked at the items as though they might be infected.

"It's okay. Just a little something to help you."

"Help me what?"

"Get a good start. You know, on your life."

"My life?" Sofia sounded as though she needed an introduction to the concept.

"Yeah. Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?"

Bride laughed. "You don't remember me. Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who..."

It was swifter than the way she had gotten into the taxi.

Changing from slightly stooped penitent to undefeated acrobat, Sofia Huxley knocked Bride to the floor then leaned down to beat the life out of her. Wild, hard-fisted, screaming "You! You!" she pummeled Bride's face. Then she dragged her to the door and threw her out of the room the way sanitation workers handle plastic trash bags—one hand at the neck, the other on the bottom, an efficient move made graceful by habit.

Bride lay on the pavement with just enough sense to search out her teeth with her tongue. The motel door slammed, then opened. Bride's purse, shopping bag and all of its contents flew through the air and bounced off her back. Before she could rise to her knees, the door to 3B opened once more, this time a black spike heeled shoe arced toward the prone and bleeding Bride. Her teeth were all there but her mouth belonged to somebody else. After crawling a few feet she tried to stand. Her legs worked, but when she tried to pick up her purse and the other items scattered around her, she discovered her

right arm was of no help at all. She collected everything the best she could with her left hand, dropped all of it in the shopping bag and limped toward her car—one shoe on, the other left behind.

"The manager," she thought. "I'll report her to the motel's manager. Have him call the police." One hour of freedom, barely tasting parole, 0071140 was going right back to the place she'd left that very afternoon. Bride caught a blurred look at her face in the Jaguar's side mirror. One closing eye was enough to convince her she didn't want to see anybody but a cop. No staring manager, guests or hamburger-chomping patrons. After pushing her things onto the passenger seat, she slid inside. The absence of pain, she knew, meant it would be deep when it came. One-armed, having to lift and steady her right hand with her left to turn on the ignition, Bride peeked into the rear view mirror. Her mouth, bloody and swelling looked as though it was stuffed with uncooked liver; the right side of her face was scraped. "Uhh," she moaned. "Uhh. Uhh."

Police was all she could think of and once the problems of shifting gears with her left hand and managing pedals with a bare foot were solved, she drove the two miles into Norristown's main street where she saw nothing. Nobody. Her breathing was beginning to sound like snoring. The raw liver in her mouth blocked her throat and her nose wasn't working. Just when she thought she would have to brake or pass out, she saw the arrow pointing to the Police Department, situated in a lot behind a thrift shop. Pulling up to its entrance she didn't have to lean out of the window to see another sign. Closed. With one-eyed inspection she could barely read the rest: Sheriff back at 6:00 p.m. Clerk, Abbey something, had more hours. Mon Wed 10:30 A.M to 3:00 P.M. Oh, God, she thought, with her first burst of clarity. Of course. What would be the point of keeping big city office hours on a Sunday? With a four hundred bed women's prison five miles away and the State Trooper's headquarters on its site there was no need for anything other than a homey <sup>little</sup> tiny town police station just capable enough to hold out-of-control

teenagers and a drunk or two. With a second burst of sense she decided engaging police was a lousy idea. They would write a report, at the least, interview the accused also. Written up in the local newspaper <sup>the</sup> publicity would embarrass her and mock her new line of cosmetics.

Hammers of pain were starting and as she rummaged her purse for the cell phone, Bride started to cry and was crying still when Norma answered.

"Later, perhaps," the nurse smiled. "When the morning doctor gets here he will decide if you need more narcotics."

Neither Bride nor Norma could hear her departing footsteps, so they waited a full minute before Norma whipped out her cosmetic mirror and let the patient see the damage.

"Ruined," whispered Bride.

"No its not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?"

"A surgeon did her face. A maniac did mine," said Bride, her tongue barely working.

Norma was as jittery with optimism as she was with curiosity. "Well, tell me. What really happened?" Bride had been vague when describing her 'accident' to the twelve-year-old faced doctor and used tears to curtail further inquiry. He didn't press her, worked quickly and exited just as quickly leaving her at the mercy of the part-time nurse.

Bride didn't know how to answer. "I'm tired. Hungry, too." <sup>1 hurt and</sup>  
 Twelve hours had passed since her breakfast of half a blood orange.

"Here's applesauce. And juice." Norma fiddled with the carton, trying to stick in the straw.

"I want a steak. Raw."

"Who's going to chew it for you? Not me. I'm off animals."

Bride held the mirror again. A quarter of her face was fine. The other three fourths cratered. Hateful black stitches, puffy eye,

bandages on her forehead; her lips so Ubangi she couldn't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw.' Codeine had stopped her jaw from hurting, but it was stiff, immobile, like her right arm. Under the worn, flowered hospital gown her ribs were encased in steel bands disguised as white strips of gauze. Worse than any of it, however, was her nose; nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze the size of half a bagel. Near it her un-bruised eye cowered, bloodshot, practically dead. Norma could chatter all she wanted, but Bride knew her job at Sylvia, Inc. was in danger. How could she persuade women to improve their looks with products that could not improve her own? There wasn't enough foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypoderm. Assuming all this would fade she would still need plastic surgery, which meant weeks and weeks of idleness, hiding behind sun glasses and floppy hats.

"Don't sweat it," Norma had said. "I've already talked to Fayed and Joanna, too. They said take all the time you need. Insurance pays for everything. Just keep in touch, they said, for the fall launch."

"I cant' eat, I can't talk, I can't think." Bride's voice was whiney, her words without consonants.

"Hey, girlfriend," said Norma. "Pity party's over. We've got to get you out of here. This clinic is a dump. They don't even have private rooms. The whole place is an emergency room with one spacey nurse and two part time doctors living fifty miles away. Remember how long it took to get you looked at? Anybody with a license, I mean. That nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that online nursing course she took."

"You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

"Who knows? In this trailer-park clinic? I'm driving you to a real hospital—with a toilet and a sink in the room."

"Don't they have to release me? I mean doesn't a doctor have to?"

"Please. We're not staying overnight. We're leaving." Norma was all business. "I bought sweats and flip-flops. No decent hospital out here but the Mall's got a very respectable Wal-Mart. Come on. Up. I'll help you. Where did she put your skirt and blouse? We'll get some frozen ice pops or slurries on the way. Or a milkshake. That's probably better medicine-wise or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe. Oh, Bride. Don't look like that. It really is going to be all right."

Norma drove slowly because every bump and turn made her friend wince.

"I didn't know you were twenty-five. I thought you were my age. Twenty-two. I saw it on your driver's license. You know, when I was looking for your insurance card for the forms I had to fill out. You don't look it, though. Even now your one good eye looks twenty-two."

Norma laughed hoping to get a chuckle out of her friend's space-ship mouth. It didn't. Chatter wasn't helping, so Norma went for the heart.

"So who was he?"

"Who was who?"

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy?" Bride couldn't remember her telephone conversation in detail. Just the "Norma, I'm hurt bad. Please you gotta come help me," and the best directions she could manage to the rear of the thrift shop where she was parked. In the couple of hours it took her friend to GPS and find her, she must have slept, maybe fainted a couple of times as the pain began its hammering. When Norma arrived, Bride might have said anything. The job at hand was to get into Norma's car and leave the Jaguar locked and parked elsewhere until the tow truck arrived.

"Who else? Are you telling me a woman did this?"

"No. No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

"Yeah. I suppose. Somebody scared him off, I guess. He banged me around, threw me down and took off."

"He didn't even take your purse, wallet, anything?"

"Sweet, I guess."

"Why didn't whoever scared him off stay and help you?"

"I don't know!"

Norma backed off. Bride was sobbing, or trying to. Her single open eye wasn't up to it and her mouth obviously hurt too much to continue. After a few miles of silence, Norma made her voice as casual as she could. "What were you doing up here anyway?"

"I came to see a friend."

"You find him?"

"Her. No. I never found her."

"Who is she?"

"Somebody from a long time ago. She wasn't there. Probably dead by now."

Norma took her eyes away from the road to glance at Bride. Whoever it was, she thought, the almost raper must have rattled her friend's brainpan. Otherwise why would she tell such a silly lie? Like a kid with soiled pants saying, "That wasn't me did it." When she stuffed Bride's little white skirt and single shoe into the shopping bag she found twenty-five thousand dollars and an airline gift certificate, not to speak of samples of YOU, Girl products so new they hadn't been launched. A would-be raper might not want any Nude Skin Glo, but free cash? Whatever the truth, whatever Bride was hiding, Norma decided to let it go, to wait till her friend was healed, body and mind. Bride, agitated by being unable to swallow juice, curled up against the passenger door and closed her single open eye. It was well into night by the time Norma drove into the garage of her patient's condominium. It took some time, but Norma stayed until her friend was showered, robed and able to sip a half cup of tomato soup

through a straw. Shushing and soothing the teary, sleepy girl, Norma promised to return early in the morning.

Six weeks later Bride sat wrapped in a cashmere and silk blanket hoping the music from her I pod would cancel memory. It didn't. In fact it sharpened recall and the accompanying hurt feelings and justifiable anger. She pulled out the ear plugs.

She really was a freak. Mrs. Huxley. The eyes. The quick change from dutiful, obedient ex-con to feral predator. From slack-lipped to fangs. From slouch to arrow. Bride never saw the signal—no grip of neck cords, no shoulder flex. Nothing announced the onslaught.

Bride was only eight years old, still little Lula Ann, when she had lifted her arm and pointed a nail bitten finger toward the young couple sitting at the long table.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?"

Nod.

"You have to speak Lula. Say 'yes' or 'no.'"

"Yes."

"Can you show us where she is seated?"

Lula Ann raised her arm slowly to avoid knocking the paper cup  
of water the lawyer lady had given her. <sup>over</sup>

"Relax. Take your time, Lula."

And she did. Her hand was in a fist until the arm was straight.

Then she unfolded her forefinger. Pow! like a cap pistol.

Sofia Huxley opened her mouth, as though to say something.

She looked shocked, unbelieving. But the finger pointed, pointed so  
long the lawyer lady had to touch her hand and say "Thank you,  
Lula," to get her to put her arm down.

Outside the court room <sup>little Lula Ann</sup> she was petted, embraced, smiled at by  
mothers exhausted by tears, drained of despair but not anger. Heart-  
broken fathers gave her a thumbs-up. <sup>est</sup> Dear, pleased and proud of

T  
? Mommy

her brave little girl led her away. They descended the courthouse steps in a cloud of 'April Dawn' cologne wafting from her mother's clothes.

This was the worst part of recovery. Not the traces of pain or the slow approach of her face to normal, but the hours of nothing to do but recast memory to suit. Bride's eyes were well enough to cry from, so <sup>they</sup> ~~she~~ <sup>so</sup> did off and on throughout the lonely days. Visits from friends annoyed her with their hollow conversation and smiles of false pity. Television was idiotic; print made her dizzy and plot lines were beyond her grasp. Vases of gorgeous flowers, over packed, overdone nauseated her. Music was especially irritating. Vocals, both the beautiful ones and the mediocre, depressed her; instrumentals were worse. Obviously something awful had been done to her tongue because her taste buds were gone or in hiding. Everything tasted like lemons—except lemons, which tasted like salt. Wine was a waste since percodan produced a thicker, more habitable fog.

spill  
tears

But no pill could stop the memory train from returning again and  
 again to the depot motel. <sup>-- a solitary</sup> in an <sup>unremarkable town,</sup>

She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only  
 one who turned Sofia Huxley into 0071140. There was other  
 testimony about her nastiness. <sup>her criminality</sup> She has no family anymore. Her  
 husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries.  
 Nobody was there to meet her. Nobody. So why not accept...help  
 instead of whatever check out counter or cleaning woman job she  
<sup>might be given.</sup>  
~~had been given.~~ Rich parolees didn't end up cleaning out toilets at  
 Wendy's. Bride was not just hurt by the broken jaw, arm, ribs, you-  
 name-it; she was ashamed of them. Fact was, she had not fought  
 back. She had just lain there, unresisting as Sofia battered her. She  
 could have died there if the attacker, her pale face gone apple red,  
 had not grown tired. But Bride took it—not a sound, not a single  
 defensive gesture. Weary and panting Sofia had dragged her to her  
 knees, pushed her through the door. Bride could still feel the hard  
 hands clenching neck skin, her behind, and hear the crack of her ~~own~~ <sup>stet</sup>

~~stet~~ ~~bones~~ ~~elbow~~ hitting concrete. Elbow, ankle, jaw. The long slide and rip of arms grabbing for balance as she fell. Her tongue searching through blood for teeth. And when the last item was thrown at her, the spike-heeled shoe, she had simply crawled away. Once again, taking it. "You are not the woman..." then pretending it didn't matter.

Foam spurting from an aerosol can made him laugh, so he lathered with shaving soap and a brush, a handsome thing of boar's hair swelling from an ivory handle. It ought to remain in the heap she tossed in the trash: toothbrush, mouthwash, strop and straight razor. Everything—toiletries, clothes, items easily replaced he left behind, as well as a cloth bag containing two books, one in a foreign language he could read but not speak, a book of poems and a notebook. It was an abandonment that suggested <sup>speed</sup> flight as well as finality.

For reasons she couldn't or dare not examine (surely she didn't want keepsakes) Bride had picked through the trash basket, retrieved the shaving brush and bone handled straight razor and placed both in

the medicine cabinet. When the cabinet door clicked she stared at her face in its mirror.

"You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time." Jeri the buyer, who called himself a 'total person' designer, was insistent. "Not only because of your name, but because of what it does to your <sup>chocolate</sup> Godiva skin. Makes people think of <sup>Godiva</sup> white-chocolate every time they see you."

"Or Oreos?" she asked.

"Classier," he hissed. "Bon bons. Hand dipped."

Although it was boring at first, looking for white only clothes—ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white—it got more interesting when she began choosing colors for accessories.

"Listen, Bride baby. If you must have a drop of color confine it to shoes and purse, but I'd keep them black when white simply won't do."

"What about jewelry? Gold. Some diamonds? An emerald brooch?"

"No, no," said Jeri. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No! Not even that. Just you, girl. All <sup>sable?</sup> mink and milk.

Everybody's dream, believe me. And with your body? Puh-leeze."

Bride did as he directed and certainly cut a stunning, unforgettable figure. Double takes everywhere. Loved by all. Well, adored anyway. Plus Jeri had given her the name of her new cosmetics line.

Six weeks and the stitch scars were hardly visible. Her lips were back to normal, as were the nose, the eye, the elbow, the jaw. Only the rib area remained tender and, much to her surprise, the scraped skin had healed the fastest. The face she was examining in the mirror was good as new, almost, so why did she feel so bad, so sad? Bride opened the cabinet and removed the shaving brush, fingered it, letting the silky hair tickle. She looked again at her

reflection. Slowly she brought the brush to her chin, stroking it, then the jaw, the underside, the<sup>n</sup> up to her ear lobes. Trolling above her lip she felt faint. "<sup>Lather</sup>Soap." She thought. "I need <sup>lather</sup>soap." She tore open a fancy box containing a tube of body foam 'for the skin he loves', squeezed it in<sup>to</sup> the soap dish and wet the brush. Slathering the <sup>foam</sup>creamy lather on the lower part of her face took her breath away.

She paused, gathered herself and proceeded to cover more. The look astonished her. How wide and lustrous her eyes became, how elegant her nose, her lips so kissable she touched them with the tip of her little finger. It wasn't too long before she clasped the <sup>straight</sup>razor, awkwardly. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement she couldn't remember. It would take practice. Meantime, using the razor's dull edge, she carved dark chocolate avenues through swirls of white lather. Splashing water on her face she realized the sweet satisfaction that followed was unparalleled in her brief life.

Working from home Bride had the best of all worlds—a delicious combination of authority, self-pity and slake-able desire.

Calling the shots for promotional material, assignments and so on was fulfilling, but too easy. Feeling legitimate sorrow for her self was better. The thrill, the antidote, was tucked in a little kit where the shaving equipment lay. When ennui or desire swept through her she could stroke the boar's hair down her cheek or, if she chose or needed to, she could indulge herself fully, numbing the many ways she had been wronged. In that warm soapy vat she could re-imagine both powerful and trivial incidents of rejection without pain. "She's real pretty under all that black," neighbors agreed. Reared by a mother who never attended parent-teacher conferences or school plays, the low expectations of people had of her because of her color: business courses instead of college track; community college instead of a four-year State while working first stock, then the cosmetic counter, becoming a buyer only after promotions were parceled out to white girls dumber than planks. Even the move to Sylvia Inc was marred at first by a question of her style, her clothes. So she consulted Jeri on her own and stealing his comment on the

uniqueness of the style he invented for her ("No. Just you, girl."), sky rocketed to Regional Manager. "See?" said Jeri. "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls have to strip <sup>Naked</sup> to get that kind of attention."

Along the way up, after learning the vocabulary and experimental tricks of sex, her love life became less like diet Coke—sweet without nutrition—but as routine as a play station game simulating the safe glee of violence and just as brief. All <sup>of her lovers were</sup> fundamentally repeats: the would-be actors, rappers, artists, players waiting for her paycheck like an allowance; others already professionally successful treating her like a medal, like shiny mute testimony to their prowess. None giving, helpful—all disdaining her work, her ideas, baby-talking her through what she thought was serious conversation before finally locating a more reliable source of ego enhancement elsewhere.

Then him, Booker. Reid Booker. So independent, tender, good looking, tough, funny, honest. <sup>He seemed completely</sup> So ~~seemingly~~ fascinated by her.

His body was  
flawless except  
for the tiny  
reddish birth mark  
on his shoulder.

They had joking arguments about sexy shades of lipstick, grave ones in which he explained why he despised the whole idea of make-up. And he explained the difference between 'meaning' and accuracy. None of which she could fathom. And no routine morning/evening lovemaking for him. His appetite for sex was intermittent—periods of evangelical reticence following an earth shaking need to erupt. All surprise, no routine. He slept through porn videos and chuckled when she teased him with sex toys. Yet he could making feeding ducks popcorn an adventure. Then suddenly out of nowhere, literally nowhere, "You are not the woman..."<sup>#</sup>and vanishing like a ghost.

Dumped.

Like always.

Even Sofia Huxley of all people dumped her. The felon could have said "no thanks," or even "get out." Unless physical brutality was prison talk. Instead of emphatic words, savagery and bloodletting were required in case the other inmate was retarded.

Bride was not sure which was worse—sudden inexplicable abandonment or sudden unjustified assault. Ripping a heart or crushing a body. While she could admit she may have startled Sofia into reflexive rage, it should have been clear that her motive, her gesture was all about forgiveness. But there was no such excuse for Reid Booker. The day before "You are not..." they had had lunch in her office, lobster salad, Smart water, peach slices smiling lazily in brandy. <sup>The argument preceding the lunch seemed trivial to her.</sup> He seemed distant—gazing instead of looking, <sup>Still the</sup> but possibility of flight did not surface. <sup>Although</sup>

Stir crazy and tired of wandering her condo, a west coast version of a New York loft, all light, space and loneliness, Bride donned another white uniform, shorts, halter, high-heeled rope and straw sandals and tucked the shaving kit in her beige canvas tote. She snatched up Elle Magazine and sunglasses. Norma would be pleased to know that she had taken a bracing walk and sat in the park casually, calmly reading, her long legs crossed, her manner cool. Dog walkers and seniors visited the park this time of day. Later

on there would be runners and skaters, seldom a mother and child.

On Saturday in this neighborhood children had play dates, were guarded by nannies in patios, play rooms, pool side or in restaurants designed for their joy.

Bride chose a bench near an artificial pond where real ducks sailed. Deliberately not thinking of him or popcorn or lectures about the difference between wild drakes and yard birds, studiously blocking a memory of cool massaging fingers, she flipped through the pages of Elle. At the sound of slow footsteps on gravel, she looked up to see a <sup>grey</sup> white-haired couple strolling by, silent, holding hands.

Their paunches were the exact same size, although his was lower down. Both wore colorless slacks and loose t-shirts imprinted with faded language, front and back, about peace. Theirs was the long, intimate life together that evoked such envy that the teen-aged dog minders snickered and yanked leashes for no reason at all. The couple moved languidly as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to the space ship where, at

last, a door would slide open and a tongue of red carpet roll out.

There they would ascend, hand in hand, into the arms of a benevolent <sup>presence</sup> alien and their smiles would be accompanied by music so beautiful, so familiar it would bring you to tears. Bride reached into her bag and once she found the shaving brush, diddled it lightly, privately until she was soothed.

Norma chose the restaurant. Something semi-chic, a formerly hot, now barely hanging on place catering to a few tourists and the decidedly un-cool. She must have thought the pretty food, the male waiters with red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests would call Bride back from the dead, the hibernation her friend had been insisting on for too long. Although there was no medical evidence, Norma thought Bride was behaving in a classically post-rape manner. Tiny steps forward into action, into social life, into a new male relationship were needed. No pressure, just a quiet dinner in a failing restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display. The evening air was too brisk for the sleeveless white shift, transparent in interesting

places that Bride wore, but Norma was encouraged by the effort taken. Even she, who knew, could hardly detect the scars. Bride was as striking as ever.

They talked office gossip through the appetizer, the subject collapsing with the mahi mahi.

"I want a vacation, to go somewhere." Bride nudged the fish away from the pine nuts.

"Oooh. Where?" This is really good news thought Norma.

"No kids, though."

"That's easy."

"And no parties."

"Say what?"

"Settled people with paunches. I want to play shuffleboard on a deck. Bingo, maybe."

"Bride, you're scaring me."

"No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than waves lapping or ice melting in plastic glasses."

"Aw, man. You're still in shock. You can't make any plans till it wears off. You won't know what you want until then. Trust me."

"I do know. Listen." Bride drove fork tines into the fish, breaking it into raggedy layers. "I lied. I lied to you. That was a woman beat the hell out of me. Somebody I was trying to help. She would have killed me if she could."

"A woman? Who?"

"You don't know her."

"You don't either, obviously."

"I did once."

"Bride, don't give me scraps. Let me have the whole plate, please."

It took merely three minutes to tell it. How when she was a little girl in the second grade, a teacher in the kindergarten building next to the main school played nasty with her students.

"I can't hear this," Norma palmed her forehead.

"You asked for the whole plate."

"Okay, okay."

"She was caught and sent away," Bride murmured.

"Good. So what's the problem?"

"I testified."

"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. Pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

"And?"

"They put her in prison. A twenty-five year sentence."

"Got it. End of story, no?"

"No. I thought about her off and on, you know?"

"Uh uh. Tell me."

"Well, she was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"Now she's <sup>close to</sup> ~~over~~ forty and I thought she probably has no friends."

"Poor thing. No kiddies to diddle in the joint. What a drag."

"You're not hearing me."

"You better believe it. Of course I'm not listening to you. You nuts? Who is this female alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean.

She related to you? What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be lonely."

"She's alive. That not good enough for her?"

Bride sighed and signaled the waiter. "Again," she told him, nodding toward the apple martini glass.

"None for me Cookie," said Norma responding to the waiter's lifted eyebrows. "I need cold sobriety."

The waiter obliged with a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.

"I don't know why I went. What I do know is I kept remembering her. All these years in Decagon."

"You write her? Visit?"

"No. I've seen her only twice. Once at her trial and then when this happened." Bride gestured toward her eye.

"Idiot. You put her behind bars! Of course she wanted to put your lights out."

"She wasn't like that before. She was gentle, funny even and kind."

"Before what? You said you saw her twice, at the trial and when she clocked you. But before you said she taught next door and you saw her diddling kids, so..."

The waiter leaned in with the drink.

"Okay. Three times." Bride frowned.

Norma touched the corner of her mouth with the tip of a fingernail, thinking, the woman must have molested Bride too. But she was in the second grade, she said. Maybe. Maybe. Is that why she couldn't forget her, went to see her with presents? Because she liked it? This was thick and getting thicker. Maybe Bride was an unconscious lesbian. But why would she be? There were no more closets. The company was practically run by bi-sexuals; a good share of their customers included trannies, straights, gays—anyone who took their looks seriously. No, no, not so thick, after all. Her

friend's funk must be the guy. Lover man walks, she feels down,  
goes to make nice with a female child molester she helped convict.

Sisters in grief.

"Waiter! Honey. I've changed my mind. Bluveltdt. Rocks.  
Double it." The waiter winked. "You got it," he said, hitting 'got' with  
what must have earned him a promising cell phone number in  
Missouri.

"Look, girlfriend." Norma turned to Bride. "Think about it.  
What made you feel so sorry for her?"

"I don't know. I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Less  
disposable. Sofia, that's her name, was all I could think of, someone  
who would appreciate some...some...without strings..."

"I get it."

"Really? Do you?"

"Absolutely. The dude splits, you feel like cow flop, you try to  
get your mojo back, but it's a bust, right?"

"Right."

"So we fix it."

"How?"

"Well, not with no bingo."

"What then?"

"Blingo!" Norma shouted.

"You called?" asked the waiter.

Everything had turned out perfectly. Hair, dress, makeup.

Bride was the main attraction at the celebration. A company award,

was it? Or a surprise pre-launch party? Something as important as it

was glamorous. In any case a crowd waited. Was there a limo

coming? Surely she would not have to drive herself. Where was it?

A hotel? A smarty-pants museum? The uneasiness of the questions

only added to her excitement and kicked up the level of pride in her

appearance. Diamond-like jewels spangling the <sup>white</sup> lace gown, tight fitting above the mermaid tail at her ankles, blatantly transparent everywhere but the interesting places—nipples and the bush-less spot below her navel. Just the earrings, now. One carat diamonds. Modest, nothing flashy, nothing to detract from her chocolate and whipped cream palette beneath the glittering white. Now, what? Jesus. They wouldn't go in. The platinum stem kept slipping away from her ear lobe. Bride looked closer and discovered her ears were not pierced. How could that be? She had had pierced ears since she was twelve and so proud of the tiny gold-ish hoops Dear had bought her. She never wore clip-ons. Never. Pearl dots usually, defying celebration had mentioned the absence of earrings. Strange, 'total person' designer Jeri. Diamonds sometimes, like now. But there they were—virgin earlobes untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb. It was more than disconcerting; it was destabilizing. Had the plastic surgeon done it somehow? Side effects of the antibiotic he prescribed? But that was months ago. Bride felt dizzy. She wanted the shaving brush. Okay, she decided. No jewelry, then,

*Mommy*

like Jeri preferred. The light-headedness stopped but not the anxiety. She reached for the shaving brush but fearful of ruining her make up, had to be content with touching lightly the lace at her cleavage.

The phone rang. "Your car, Miss Bride."

If she faked sleep, maybe he would just leave. Whoever he was, she didn't want to face him. The caress of his lips on her shoulder was light, then his finger shifted her hair behind her ear. Murmuring as though dreaming, she smiled without opening her eyes or turning toward him. He moved the bedclothes and went into the bathroom. Bride sneaked a touch to her earlobes. Nobody at the celebration had mentioned the absence of earrings. Strange, because all through the speeches, the dinner, the dancing her reformed lobes were so much on her mind she couldn't concentrate, causing her to laugh too long at a witless joke, to drink twice what she could gracefully hold, to flirt like a prom queen candidate with no chance of winning, which is how whoever he was got in her bed. She

This is what crazy must be, she thought. Hurriedly she relieved the

tasted her tongue hoping the film belonged to her alone. God. And thankfully no handcuffs in sight.

He had showered and was dressing now and calling her name. Would she have to look at him? She pulled a pillow over her head and heard him chuckle. Then kitchen noises as he made coffee. No, not coffee; she would have smelled it. He was pouring something—orange juice, Smart water, V Eight? A few minutes of silence then steps, next a tick on the nightstand followed by the click of a lock. Door closed. Bride peeped from under the pillow to see tent-folded notepaper next to the clock. Telephone number. "Fabulous." Followed by his name. Happiness--he was not a company employee.

Gingerly she rose and entered the bathroom. A quick check in the wastebasket followed by a breath of relief at the sight of a used condom. There were traces of steam on the shower glass near which the mirror, clear and sparkling, confirmed what she had seen the previous evening. Ear lobes as chaste as the day she was born. This is what crazy must be, she thought. Hurriedly she retrieved the

shaving brush. There was not a single hair in her armpit, but she lathered it anyway. Then the other one. A new idea surfaced. Later on, if she felt like it, she might repeat the delight on her pudenda. Wouldn't that be tricky with a straight razor? Tricky. Oh, yes. But nothing stopped her violent headache so she swallowed two vicodans and went back to bed.

My life is a mess, she thought. What happened? I have what I worked for and am good at it. Well, some junk in the past, but she'd gotten beyond it. Even <sup>he</sup> ~~Booker~~ thought so, didn't he? Bride had spilled her guts to him. She described in detail how <sup>Mommy's</sup> ~~Dear's~~ room always seemed unlit although nothing was hidden. Grown up women things covered the vanity: tweezers, cotton balls, round boxes and square perfume bottles, hairpins in a tiny saucer, tissue, eyebrow pencils, mascara, nail file. Over it all the smell of sweet, cheap face powder—Lucky Lady. As a six-year-old she loved looking at the display but never dared touch. Laughing to hide her embarrassment she told him about the day she lingered over the dresser and heard

what she thought was the frightened meows of a cat through the bedroom's open window. Looking down below in the walled area leading to the apartment building's basement, she saw, instead of a cat, a man leaning over the short, fat legs of a child between the hairy thighs of the man. His trousers were down around his ankles. He had the same hair as Mr. Leigh, the landlord, but it couldn't be him she was sure. He was a stern man but not a nasty one. He demanded the rent be paid before noon on the day it was due and charged a late fee even if you knocked at his door five minutes after 12:00. Dear was so intimidated by him she made sure her daughter delivered the envelope of cash early in the morning. Bride guessed that more frightening than standing up to the landlord was having to look for another apartment--to go through interrogations about work, income, history and maybe a recommendation from their previous land lord. It would have been hard finding a location in a safe, meaning mixed, neighborhood. When Bride told her what she'd seen at the basement wall, Dear was more upset by what the

consequences might be than the event, telling her "Don't say anything, Lula. Don't tell anybody about what you saw, hear me? Forget it. Not a single word." She was afraid to tell her that although she had not made a sound, something made the landlord look up just as he was zipping his pants while the boy lay whimpering at his feet. She stood there scared, trembling. Then she heard him say, "Hey, little nigger! Close that window and get the hell outta there!"

Relaying the incident to Booker, Bride had suddenly missed the cosmetics filled vanity. Even then she had wanted to move the items to a safer place, somewhere beyond the window and the walled space below. <sup>(over)</sup> ^

Now, sleepless, waiting for her headache to subside, Bride's thoughts drifted. ~~Maybe, she wondered, what if it was the landlord~~ her finger was pointing toward in that courtroom—the idea of him, his brutality and the curse he threw at her. She had never heard the word before, but its ~~personal~~ <sup>hatred</sup> revulsion and its ~~nastiness~~ <sup>^</sup> did not need definition. Nor did milder forms of the curse or its more pointed

Booker's eyes <sup>had</sup> clouded but  
~~that he could~~ his sadness was on full  
display.

language of classmates. The curse became septic, coursing through her veins for years without antibiotics. Not being a 'little nigger girl' was her driving force thereafter. And she managed to develop her own antibiotic with determination and skill. So becoming a deep black beauty, selling its elegance at a very high price was more than pay back, it was glory.

"You accepted like a beast of burden the whip of a stranger's word and the mindless menace it held along with the scar it left as a definition you spend your life refuting although it is only a slim line drawn on a shore and quickly dissolved in the sea-world at any moment when an equally mindless wave fondles it like the accidental touch of a finger on a clarinet stop that the musician converts into silence in order to let the true note sound out loud."

What is this? The handwriting was so tiny, Bride had to squint to read it. The notebook was small, about four inches by six, and

worn. It was full of long sentences like that. Rummaging through the cloth bag he'd left, Bride had ignored the book in German, barely glanced at the poetry collection by somebody named Hass and opened what she thought was an old-fashioned address book. Scanning it for some mention of her name and finding none she began to try reading the handwriting. What she had just read was incomprehensible to her but more than that it was disturbing. Thumbing through to another page, she read

"I refuse to be ashamed of my shame, you know the one assigned to me which matches the low priority of those who insist upon this most facile of human feelings of inferiority and flaw simply to disguise their own cowardice by pretending it is identical to a banjo's purity."

<sup>the hell</sup>  
What is he talking about, she wondered, then, in a whisper, "I thought I knew him."

Days of mail overflowed the delicately woven Indian basket that held it. Its untidiness led Bride to go through it—tossing junk and separating first class mail. Among the latter was a letter addressed to Reed Booker. She tore it open. A tool repair shop; the item was ready; would he pick it up and should they send the invoice to current address or to tk? So, that's where he is? Bastard. Before she could decide whether to trash the invoice or pick the item up her self the phone rang.

"Hey. How was it? Last night? Fab, huh? You were a knockout." Norma was slurping something between words. A nutritious, calories-less, energy-filled, diet-supporting, fake-flavored, creamy dye-colored whatever.

"Yeah."

"You don't sound sure. Did that guy you left with turn out to be Mr. Rogers? Who is he, anyway?"

Bride looked at the bedside note. "Phil somebody."

"How was he?"

"Norma, I have to get out of here. Away somewhere."

"What? Now?"

"Didn't we talk about a cruise or something once?"

"We did. But after the launch. The gift bags are in and the ad department has several versions for review. And the rap girls are on hold." Norma couldn't suppress her excitement.

"Right," said Bride. "Look, I'll call later. I'm a bit hung over."

"No kidding."

Although she had no appetite, Bride went into the kitchen and looked in the refrigerator. The remnants in there were

depressing. She chose instead to microwave popcorn and eat it while lounging on the sofa in deep thought. Between admiring her long beautifully shaped legs and fingering her earlobes, Bride wondered what the difference was between "You are not the woman..." and "little nigger girl." Weren't they the same? And in neither case did she confront the speaker. In both cases she pretended it didn't matter, didn't hurt.

Where was that letter about a tool being ready?

## END OF CHAPTER ONE

your earlobes proving that it is easy to comprehend once you know  
 the path to its sacred space because the search for truth and its bride  
 clarity requires courage, relentless effort and refuses the seductive  
 coziness of ignorance or the soft pillow of righteousness and will not  
 be soothed by the strum of a Spanish guitar."

## CHAPTER TWO

Truth. Clarity. Whenever her thoughts drifted to company work  
 or when the music on the Jaguar's cd seduced her into forgetting her  
 destination and her purpose, Bride forced herself to repeat those  
 words. Truth. Clarity. In that collection of incomprehensible garbage  
 Booker's  
 in his notebook one struck her as a personal dare.

"Truth is never dumped in your lap or revealed in sudden  
 epiphany or right at your fingertips or right before your eyes if you  
 Truth. Clarity.  
 only knew how to see its smile or hear the words it whispers near

your earlobes proving that it is easy to comprehend once you know the path to its sacred space because the search for truth and its bride, clarity requires courage, relentless effort and refuses the seductive coziness of ignorance or the soft pillow of righteousness and will not be soothed by the strum of a Spanish guitar."

Obviously her life wasn't working. The pieces of it that she had stitched together—personal glamour, control in an exciting profession, sexual liberation, and most importantly a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love. Her response to physical attack was no less cowardly than her reaction to an unexpected, unexplained break-up.

The first produced tears; the second a flip "Yeah, so?"

*step up and*  
Disappointed in herself and dared by the notebook she decided to find out what the questions were before trying to discern answers.

Truth. Clarity.

Unable to speak to Dear or the landlord or Sofia, there was one person still available who she could confront. According to the invoice his address was tk. He might be living with another woman he didn't want or he might have moved on. Nevertheless, Bride would track him, force him to explain why she did not deserve better treatment from him, and second what did he mean by 'not the woman'? This woman? The one here dressed in oyster white cashmere with brushed rabbit covered boots the color of the moon? The one who ran a major department in a billion dollar company? The one who was already inventing newer product lines—eyelashes. In addition to breasts every woman (his kind or not) wanted bigger, longer, thicker eyelashes.

Sorry. ¶ Truth. Clarity.

The highway became less and less crowded as she drove west. Soon, she imagined, forests would edge the road. In a few hours she would be in north valley country: logging, small towns no older than she was, dirt roads as old as the Tribes. As long as she was on an

interstate, she decided to look for a diner, eat and freshen up before driving into territory too sparse for comfort. A collection of signs on one billboard advertised one brand of gas, four of food, two of lodging.

*three miles ahead*  
*Bride drove left the highway and turned in to the oasis.*

Following a meal of a trailer park version of a white egg omelet, she went into the ladies' room. The neckline of the cashmere dress was askew, slanting down over her left shoulder. Adjusting it, she noticed that the shoulder slide was due neither to bad posture <sup>nor</sup> of a *manufacturing* design flaw. The top of the dress sagged as if she had purchased a size 4 and should have selected a 2. There must be a defect in the cloth or the design otherwise she was losing weight—fast. Not a problem. No such thing as too thin in her business. She would simply choose clothes more carefully.

While paying the cashier she asked directions to Whiskey.

"Not far," said the cashier. "A hundred miles maybe one fifty. You'll make it before dark."

backwoods

Is that what ~~these~~ people called 'not far' wondered Bride. She gassed up, had the tires checked and pulled out into route tk, then turned right at exit tk, then another marked not by a number but a name: Whiskey Road.

At least it was paved, narrow and curvy but still paved and perhaps that was the reason she trusted the headlights and accelerated. The automobile overshot a bend and crashed into a sycamore and the bushes surrounding it. Bride fought the air bag, moving so hard and fast she did not notice her foot caught and twisted in the space between the brake and the buckled door until her effort to free it stunned her with pain. Nothing helped. She lay there awkwardly on the car seat trying to ease her left foot out of the elegant rabbit furred boot. She managed to get to her cell phone, but its face was blank except for the 'no service' message. The likelihood of a passing car was dim in the dark so she simply pressed the car horn desperate for the honk to do more than frighten birds. She lay there <sup>the rest of the</sup> all night, by turns afraid, asleep, furious, exhausted.

The sun merely hinted at its rise; teased the sky with a promise of revealing itself. Bride, exhausted with body cramp and leg pain, felt a tingle of hope. A wagon, a truck full of lumber, a serial killer, a boy on a bike, a bear hunter—was there no one to lend a hand? While she was imagining who or what might rescue her a small, white face appeared at the passenger's side window. A girl, young, carrying a book bag stared at her with the greenest eyes Bride had ever seen.

"Help me. Please. Help me." Bride would have screamed but she didn't have the strength.

The girl turned away and disappeared.

"Oh, God," Bride whispered. Surely the girl had gone for help. Nobody, not the mentally disabled or the genetically violent would leave her there. Would they? She decided to turn on the ignition, shift into reverse and blast the Jaguar out of there—foot or no foot. Just as she turned the ignition key to the withering sound of a dead

battery, a man appeared. He peered into the window and went around to the driver's door. When he opened it her scream startled them both. Carefully he eased her foot from under the brake pedal and free of the car's <sup>smashed</sup> door. With the emerald-eyed girl tagging along, he carried Bride half a mile down a slim path leading to a house. She said thank you, thank you, thank you and then fainted.

"Why is her skin black?"

"For the same reason yours is white."

"Oh. You mean like my kittens."

"Right. Born that way."

Bride smiled. What an easy conversation. She was half asleep eaves dropping under a "Navajo" blanket, her ankle throbbing but not debilitating now, propped on a pillow. The rescuing man had brought her to his house and asked his wife to look after her while he took the truck. He wasn't certain, but there was a chance the single doctor in

the area could be found. It wasn't a sprain, he said. It appeared to be a broken ankle. Without phone service including Bride's cell phone he had no choice but to get in his truck and drive to tk for the doctor.

"My name is Evelyn," said the wife. "My husband's is Steve. Yours?"

"Bride. Just Bride."

"Well, Bride, this is Raisen." Evelyn motioned to the emerald-eyed girl. "Actually we named her Rain, because that is where we found her, but she prefers Raisen."

"Thank you Raisen. You saved my life. Really." Bride let a tear sting its way down her cheek.

"Can I fix you something to eat?" asked Evelyn. "You must have been trapped in there all night."

Bride declined. She just wanted to nap she said.

must. Evelyn covered her with a blanket and did not whisper the kitten conversation as she moved toward the sink. She was a tall woman with unfashionable hips and a long chestnut braid hanging down her back. She reminded Bride of someone she had seen in the movies, not a recent one but something made in the forties or fifties when movie stars had distinctive faces unlike now when hairstyles alone distinguished one star from another. But she could not put a name to the memory—the actress or the film. Little Raisen, on the other hand, resembled no one Bride had ever seen: bone white face, ebony hair, neon eyes, undetermined age. What had her mother said? "That's where she was when we found her." In the rain.

Bride refused to go. She was suddenly so hungry it made her angry. She wanted to bathe and then eat before being driven to a clinic. Not another one, she thought, not another lousy country clinic. Steve and Evelyn's house seemed to be a converted studio: one large room containing table, chairs, sink, wood burning stove, a rope bed, and the worn couch Bride lay on. Above it all, a skylight that needed a good power cleaning. An open door to the rear revealed another room with two beds. Something meaty, like chicken, roasted in the oven while mother and daughter chopped

*or workshop*

mushrooms and green peppers at the obviously home made table.

Without warning they began to sing. Something cowboy-ish. "You are my sunshine, my only, only..."

Bride quickly dashed a borning memory of Dear humming some blues song while dressing, little Lula Ann looking on.

Eventually she did fall asleep only to be awakened by Steve accompanied by a very old, very rumped doctor. Expertly and without pity he announced her ankle broken and unfixable here in this house—she needed to go to the clinic for an ex ray, cast and so on. All he could do, or would do, is bind it so it wouldn't worsen.

Bride refused to go. She was suddenly so hungry it made her angry. She wanted to bathe and then eat before being driven to a clinic. Not another one, she thought, not another tacky country clinic.

"No," said Steve. "First things first."

They carried her to the truck and when she was ~~driven back~~ <sup>as they drove away</sup> from the clinic she had to admit the cast had eased her pain, as had the ~~pills~~. The

*Ibuprofen*

hunger dissipated, but the awareness of being unwashed was stronger.

"We don't have a bathroom. I'll sponge you for now," said Evelyn. "When the cast comes off, I'll heat water for the washtub."

Bride started to cry, and they let her while they all ate supper.

Later Bride roused herself to accept the plate Evelyn held before her. Quail as it turned out, not chicken, with sumptuous mushroom gravy. Following the meal Bride felt ashamed—crying every minute, petulant, childish, and unwilling to help her self or accept aid gracefully from others. Here she was among people living the barest life putting them selves out for her without hesitation asking nothing in return. Who are these people, she wondered, and where did they come from?

In the following days <sup>while waiting for the Jaguar to be repaired</sup> Bride learned that they both were college graduates now in their fifties. Steve had graduated from Reed College, Evelyn Ohio State. With constant bursts of laughter, they

described how they met. First in India (Bride saw the light of pleasant memories shining in the looks they exchanged), then London, again in Berlin. Finally in Mexico they agreed to stop meeting this way (Steve touched his wife's neck) so they got married in Tia Juana and moved to California to live a real life, said Evelyn.

Bride's envy was infantile but she couldn't stop herself.

"By 'real' you mean poor?" Bride smiled to hide the sneer.

"What does poor mean? No television?" Steve raised his eyebrows.

"It means 'no money,' " said Bride.

"Same thing," he answered. "No money, no television."

"Meaning no washing machine, no fridge, no bathroom, no...money!"

"Money get you out of that Jaguar? Money save your life?"

(over)

Pointless, she thought to  
How can anyone argue with  
old hippies! They paraded poverty  
like a badge of honor. Bride would  
have none of it. Being poor was one  
thing; choosing to be was another.  
The first was chance; the second was  
stupid.

Weeks later when the very old doctor returned to remove her cast and expose the disgusting skin underneath, Evelyn was true to her word. She poured pail after pail of hot water into a <sup>ZINC</sup> wooden tub, handed her a sponge and a bar of <sup>g</sup>hard brown soap. Bride sank into the water with profound gratitude, <sup>\*</sup>prolonging the soaping until the water had cooled completely. <sup>\*</sup>It was when she stood to dry herself <sup>\*</sup>that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat with only the nipples to prove it was not her back. Her shock was so great she plopped back down into the dirty, soapy water, holding the towel like a shield.

*\* Generating lather from chunky soap bar was hard, but she kept at it*

*\*\* with a thin, worn towel*

filed on computer  
in "Bride  
Early  
Version"

### Chapter three

#### PART TWO

Revs on  
computer

Blood stained his knuckles and his hand began to swell. The stranger he'd been beating wasn't moving any more or moaning, but

he thought he'd better walk away quick <sup>by</sup> before a student or campus

guard  
cop

thought he was the lawless one instead of the man lying on the

gravel. He'd left the beaten man's jeans open and his penis exposed

just the way they were when he first saw him at the edge of the

playground. Only a few <sup>faculty</sup> children were near the slide and one on the

swing. None apparently noticed the man licking his lips and waving

his little white stick toward them. It was the lip licking that got to

him—the tongue grazing the upper lip, the swallowing before its

return to grazing. Obviously the sight of children was as pleasurable <sup>to him</sup>

as touching them.

Booker's fist was in the man's mouth before thinking about it.

~~A light spray~~ <sup>A light spray</sup> ~~Only~~ <sup>of blood</sup> ~~by the time~~ <sup>by the time</sup>  
~~the man~~ <sup>lost consciousness</sup>  
dappled his T shirt and the man

26-67  
Camp. June

*retrieved his  
notebook and*

He <sup>^</sup>walked away—not too fast—but fast enough hoping he <sup>(over)</sup>could cross the road and would make it to class on time. He didn't, but there were a few others

sneaking into the auditorium when he arrived. They all took seats in <sup>laptops</sup>and plopped backpacks, brief cases or ~~thin computers~~ on their desks. the last rows. Only one of them had a notebook; the others had

<sup>^</sup>besides ~~Booker~~ <sup>He</sup>himself ~~laptops~~. <sup>He</sup>Booker preferred pencil on paper but his swelling hand

<sup>writing</sup>made note-taking difficult. So he listened a little, day dreamed a little

*and*

He scratched his nose to hide a yawn. The professor was going on and on about Adam Smith's wrongheadedness as he did in every lecture as though the history of economics had only one scholar worth trashing. The single other class he enjoyed was medieval history. Four years ago as an undergraduate he'd taken courses in African American Studies where the best professors were brilliant at description but could not answer any question <sup>about racism</sup>beginning with 'why.' He <sup>suspected</sup>~~supposed~~ most of the real answers concerning slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, <sup>and revolution</sup>and civil rights were about money, so he turned to history to learn how money shaped it <sup>\*</sup>all: empires, nations, colonies, with God and His enemies used to reap, then veil,

*\* every single oppressor  
in the world and created*

turn his shirt inside out

in the world and Central  
+ being single oppression

the riches. He lived in a television/internet world where the methods of mass communication and the substance of mass communication <sup>both</sup> ~~were~~ <sup>seemed to him</sup> without insight or knowledge. The weather channels were the only informative sources and they were off-base and hysterical most of the time.

Unimpressed by the lecture his thoughts returned to ~~He thought about~~ the man lying exposed near the playground.

Normal looking. Probably an <sup>always</sup> otherwise nice man—they always were. The 'nicest man in the world', ~~said~~ <sup>always said.</sup> the neighbors. 'He wouldn't hurt a fly.' Where did that cliché come from? Why not hurt a fly?

Did it mean he was too tender to take the life of an insect but could happily take the life of a child?

Booker was raised in a large tight family. Every Saturday morning, first thing, they held family conferences to answer two questions put to each of them: 1. What have you learned? 2. What problem do you have? Answers to the first ranged from "worms can't fly," "ice burns", "there are fourteen counties in this state", "the pawn is mightier than the queen." Topics relevant to the second question

with no television in sight. Now

~~for problem to watch any~~  
~~television~~  
~~side of street~~  
~~weather~~  
~~cha~~

Growing up

that, is true (and how do you know)

might be "A girl slapped me", "My shoe strings broke", "My stomach hurts", "Conjugation." The <sup>about personal problems</sup> second question prompted solutions <sup>of them</sup> from any one and after they were solved or left pending <sup>the children</sup> they were sent to bathe and dress—the older ones helping the younger. Booker loved those Saturday morning conferences rewarded by his mother's huge breakfast feasts ~~that were~~ the highlight of the weekends.

Only during the eight months when no one knew where Adam was did the conferences stop and the quiet ticked through the house like a time bomb. His father, Mr. B., <sup>f</sup> even refused to play even one of his beloved ragtime, old time, bluesy records <sup>some</sup> most of which Booker could do without, but not Satchmo. It was one thing to lose a brother; that broke his heart, but a world without Louis Armstrong's trumpet crushed it.

\* Then Adam's corpse was found. Booker placed one yellow rose on the coffin and another graveside. <sup>Soon the</sup> The house returned to its <sup>Saturday morning</sup> routine: conferences, Satchmo, Etta James, tk, breakfast feasts and the births of more <sup>Siblings</sup> children. Fearful of another crisis that eliminated

\* Only Booker and his father looked at the remains. His mother could not. The funeral <sup>seemed</sup> ~~was~~ cheap and lonely.

In spite of the crowd ~~hundreds~~ of neighbors attending; the food cooked and delivered to their door. The very excess made him ~~to~~ lonelier.

the background music Booker counted on to soothe and straighten  
<sup>tangled</sup>  
 his feelings, he asked his father if he could take trumpet lessons. Mr.

B. agreed provided his son earned half the cost. Thereafter he  
 skipped Saturday conferences for trumpet lessons.

Six years later when Booker was twelve the nicest man in the  
 world was caught, tried, convicted of SSS, sexually stimulated  
 slaughter of six boys each of whose names, beginning with Adam's,  
 was tattooed on the left bicep of the nicest man in the world. Adam.

Boise. Lenny. Mathew. Kevin. Roland.

(over)

No 91

~~Before going off to college, Booker~~ <sup>He</sup> had a small rose tattooed on

his left shoulder. The artist couldn't do yellow, so they settled for  
 pale red. ¶ His enchantment with campus life, the classes, the

professors, the raucous, demanding classmates did not wane for two  
 years, after which his mild cynicism ~~seem to crystallize~~ <sup>turned</sup> into a loose

free-floating anger. It bothered him not only because it was too easy  
 but also because it prevented him from serious thinking. All he did

was react—sneer, laugh, dismiss, find fault, demean. Unlike the

those first  
two years

easy going.  
An/Car mechanic who did home  
repairs if needed.

The police withheld ~~most~~ what they could  
of the details - but the families of ~~the~~ the  
slaughtered six could not be stopped.

The hullabaloo disturbed him, <sup>for years</sup> until  
~~he~~ he <sup>decided</sup> ~~felt compelled~~ to control the mourning  
in his own private way.

necessity of ~~his~~ trumpet playing, no new or creative thoughts were  
required and none penetrated. It ~~was~~ <sup>that</sup> with this sudden realization ~~that~~  
he reverted to the formula of those Saturday conferences on Decater  
Street: What have you learned? <sup>that you think is true</sup> What problem do you have?

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