



God Help the Child Draft Insert

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DRAFT INSERT

Opening 2
 Chap. 3
 (in Bride Area)
 p. 99

Seventy miles on roads that must have been created by deer and wolves. Truckers could navigate them but a Jaguar repaired with another model's parts had serious trouble. ^{Too tired to be nervous,} Bride drove slowly, peering steadily ahead for obstacles alive or not. By the time she saw the sign nailed to a pine, she was exhausted, nervous too. Although there were no more physical disappearances she was keenly aware of having no menstrual period for at least two months. Flat-chested without underarm or crotch hair, minus pierced ears she tried to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation into a little girl.

Whiskey, it turned out, was a dozen or so houses on both sides of a gravel road that led to a village of trailers. The houses had no addresses but some trailers had names painted on sturdy mailboxes. Under eyes suspicious of strange cars and stranger visitors, Bride cruised slowly until she saw "Queen Olive" printed on a mailbox in front of a yellow trailer. She parked, got out and was walking toward the door when she smelled gasoline and fire that seemed to be coming from the back of the trailer. When she crept to the back yard she saw a woman sprinkling gasoline on an iron bedspring, careful to note where flames needed to be fed.

Bride went back to the car and waited. Two children came to look at her, but she didn't return their stare. This was not the time to ^{question} wonder or fear what she had gotten herself into. She refused ^{flat out powering} Far out of her element, the zone of paved streets, curried lawns surrounded by people who would might not help but would not harm you, she was determined to confront her enemy—and her self. There ^{could be} was no retreat, no turning back. Half an hour passed until the sun was at the top of the sky warming the car's interior. Taking a deep breath Bride returned to the trailer's door and knocked. When the female arsonist appeared she said, "Hello. Excuse me. I'm looking for Booker Starbern. This ^{is} the address I have for him."

"That figures," said the woman. "I get a lot of his mail—plus the writing he used to send me."

"Is he here?"

"Uh uh. Nearby, though."

"Where nearby?" More driving wondered Bride.[?]

"You can walk it, but come on in. Booker aint going nowhere. He's laid up; broke his arm. Come on. You look like something a raccoon found."

Bride swallowed. For the past seventeen years she'd only been told she was gorgeous—everywhere from everybody—stunning, dreamboat, hot, wow! Now this old woman with wooly red hair and judging eyes had deleted an entire index of compliments in one stroke. Once again she was the ugly, too black little girl in her mother's house.

girl
Queen curled her finger. "Get in here. You need feeding."
^

"Look, Miss Olive...."

"Just Queen, honey. Step on in here. I don't get much company and I know hungry when I see it."

Well, that's true, thought Bride. Her anxiety during the trip masked her stomach-yelling hunger. She obeyed Queen and was pleasantly surprised at the trailer's orderliness, comfort and charm. Obviously, Queen sewed, knitted, crocheted, and made lace. Curtains, slipcovers, couch cushions, embroidered napkins all were elegantly handmade. A quilt on the headboard of an empty bed whose springs were apparently cooling in the yard was pieced in soft colors like everything else, ~~beautifully~~ ^{cleverly} mis-matched. Small antiques such as picture frames and side tables were ~~neatly~~ ^{in odd places} placed. A pot simmered on the two-burner stove. Queen, unaccustomed to being rebuffed, placed two porcelain bowls on linen mats along with matching napkins and silver soup^sspoons with filigreed handles.

Bride sat down at a ~~small~~ ^{narrow} dinner table on chair^s with decorative ~~cushions~~ ^{seat} and watched Queen ladle thick soup into their bowls. Pieces of chicken floated among peas, potatoes, corn kernels, tomato, celery, green peppers, spinach and a scattering of pasta shells. Bride couldn't identify the seasonings—curry? Cadamon? Garlic? cayenne? Red pepper and black? But the result was manna. Queen added a platter of cornbread, joined her guest and blessed the food. Neither spoke for minutes of eating. Finally Bride asked, "Why were you burning your bedsprings? I saw you back there."

burn them out

"Bed bugs," said Queen. "Every year I ~~kill them~~ before they get started."

"Oh," Bride said, then, "What kind of stuff did Booker send you? You said he sent some writings?"

"He did. Every now and then."

"What were they?"

Queen smiled. "It's my United Nations recipe from the food of all my
"Eat up. I'll show you some if you like. Why you looking for Booker? You
sure can't be his girlfriend. You sound like you don't know him too good."

"I don't, but I thought I did." Bride touched the napkin to her lips. "He left
me. All of a sudden without a word."

Queen chuckled. "Oh, he's a leaver all right. Left his own family. All 'cept
me."

"He did? Why?" Bride didn't like being classified with Booker's family, but
the news was interesting.

"His brother was murdered when they was kids and he didn't approve of his
folks' response."

"How did they respond?"

"Normal. They moved on. Started to live life like it was life. He wanted
them to establish a memorial or something in his brother's name. They ~~refused~~. I
have to take some responsibility for the break-up. I told him to keep his brother

foundation or

*were not interested.
At all.*

close, mourn as long as he needed to. I didn't count on what he took away from what I said. Anyhow, Adam's death became his own life. I think it's his only life. More?" Queen glanced at Bride's empty bowl.

"No, thanks. But it was delicious. I don't remember eating anything that good."

Queen smiled. "It's my United Nations recipe from the food of all my husbands' home towns. Seven from Delhi to Dakar from Texas to Australia and a lot in between." Now she was laughing, "So many men and all of them the same where it counts."

"Where does it count?"

"Ownership."

Don't

→ (over)

"You have any kids?"

^

"Lots. Two live with their fathers and their new wives; ^{two} ~~three~~ joined the military—one a marine, ^{ONE in the} ~~two~~ air force; ^{another} ~~one~~, my last, a daughter is in medical school; ^{is} the next to last filthy rich somewhere in New York. Most of them send me money. I suspect it's so they don't have to see me. But I see them." She waved to the photographs standing about in ^{curious -} ~~odd~~ places. "And I know how and what they think. Booker stays in touch, though. Here, I'll show you how he thinks." Queen ^{and what} ~~opened~~ ^{moved to} a cabinet where sewing materials were neatly hanging or stacked. From ^{its} ~~the~~ floor she lifted an old fashioned breadbox. After sorting through its contents, she pulled out a handful of papers clipped together and gave them to Bride.

Bride smiled. So many husbands but
still alone?

*There were
Seven
pages?*

What lovely handwriting, thought Bride, suddenly realizing that she'd never seen anything he wrote—not even his name. One page for each month they were together—plus one more. ~~Seven~~. She read the first page slowly, her forefinger tracing the lines for there was little or no punctuation.

HEY GIRL WHAT'S INSIDE YOUR CURLY HEAD BESIDES DARK ROOMS WITH DARK MEN DANCING TOO CLOSE TO COMFORT THE MOUTH HUNGRY FOR MORE OF WHAT IT IS SURE IS THERE SOMEWHERE OUT THERE JUST WAITING FOR A TONGUE AND SOME BREATH TO STROKE TEETH THAT BITE THE NIGHT AND SWALLOW WHOLE THE WORLD DENIED YOU SO GET RID OF THOSE SMOKEY DREAMS AND LIE ON THE BEACH IN MY ARMS WHILE I COVER YOU WITH WHITE SAND FROM SHORES YOU HAVE NEVER SEEN LAPPED BY WATERS SO CRYSTAL AND BLUE THEY MAKE YOU SHED TEARS OF BLISS AND LET YOU KNOW THAT YOU BELONG FINALLY TO THE PLANET YOU WERE BORN ON AND NOW CAN JOIN THE OUT-THERE WORLD IN THE DEEP PEACE OF A CELLO.

the words
Bride read it twice understanding little if anything. It was the second page that made her uncomfortable.

HER IMAGINATION IS IMPECCABLE THE WAY IT CUTS AND SCRAPES THE BONE NEVER TOUCHING THE MARROW WHERE THAT AWFUL FEELING IS THRUMMING LIKE A FIDDLE FOR FEAR ITS STRINGS WILL BREAK AND SCREECH THE LOSS OF ITS TUNE SINCE FOR HER PERMANENT IGNORANCE IS SO MUCH BETTER THAN THE QUICK OF LIFE.

Reading the third page, she thought she remembered a conversation they'd had that could have provoked what he ~~wrote~~ *had written*

↑

YOU ACCEPTED LIKE A BEAST OF BURDEN THE WHIP OF A STRANGER'S WORD AND THE MINDLESS MENACE IT HOLDS ALONG WITH THE SCAR IT LEAVES AS A DEFINITION YOU SPEND YOUR LIFE REFUTING ALTHOUGH THAT WORD IS ONLY A SLIM LINE DRAWN ON A SHORE AND QUICKLY DISSOLVED IN THE SEAWORLD 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 RING OUT LOUD.

Bride read three more pages with intense curiosity.

TRYING TO UNDERSTAND MALIGNANCY ONLY FEEDS IT, MAKES IT BALLOON-FAT AND LOFTY FLOATING HIGH OVERHEAD FEARFUL OF SINKING TO EARTH WHERE A BLADE OF GRASS COULD PUNCTURE IT LETTING ITS WATERY FECES SOIL THE ENTHRALLED AUDIENCE THE WAY MOLD RUINS PIANO KEYS BOTH BLACK AND WHITE, SHARP AND FLAT TO PRODUCE A DIRGE OF ITS DECAY.

I REFUSE TO BE ASHAMED OF MY SHAME, YOU KNOW, THE ONE ASSIGNED TO ME WHICH MATCHES THE LOW PRIORITY AND THE DEGRADED MORALITY OF THOSE WHO INSIST UPON THE 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.

THANK YOU. YOU GAVE ME RAGE AND FRAILTY AND HOSTILE RECKLESSNESS AND WORRY WORRY WORRY DAPPLED WITH SUCH UNCOMPROMISING SHARDS OF LIGHT AND LOVE IT SEEMED A KINDNESS IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO LEAVE YOU AND NOT FOLD INTO A GRIEF SO DEEP IT WOULD BREAK NOT THE HEART BUT THE MIND THAT KNOWS THE OBOE'S SHRIEK AND THE WAY IT TEARS INTO RAGS THE SILENCE TO EXPOSE YOUR BEAUTY TOO DAZZLING TO CONTAIN AND WHICH TURNS ITS MELODY INTO THE GRACE OF LIVABLE SPACE.

Puzzled, Bride looked at Queen who said, "Interesting, yes?"

"Very," answered Bride. "But strange too. I wonder who he's talking to."

"Himself," muttered Queen. "They're all about him. At least I think so."

"No," whispered Bride, turning a page. "These are about me." Then she read the last page.

YOU SHOULD TAKE HEARTBREAK OF WHATEVER KIND SERIOUSLY WITH THE COURAGE TO LET IT RIDE AND BURN LIKE THE PULSING STAR IT IS UNABLE OR UNWILLING TO BE SOOTHED INTO PATHETIC SELF-BLAME BECAUSE ITS EXPLOSIVE BRILLIANCE RINGS LOUD LIKE THE DIN OF A TYMPANY.

Bride put the papers down and covered her eyes.

"Go see him," Queen murmured. "He's down the road at number 44. Come on, get up, wash your face and go."

"I'm not sure I should, now."

"What's the matter with you?" Queen sounded annoyed. "You come all this way and just turn around?" Then she started singing: "I don't know why there's no sun up in the sky. I can't go on. Everything I had is gone. Stormy weather."

Damn!

"You're right!" Bride slapped the table. "This about me, not him. Me!"

"You? Get out!" Booker rose from his narrow bed and pointed at Bride who stood in the open door of his trailer.

"Oh, no. I'm not leaving until you—"

"I said out! Now!" Booker's eyes were both dead and alive with hatred. His uncast arm pointed toward the door. Bride took seven quick steps forward and slapped Booker's face as hard as she could. He hit her back with just enough power to knock her down. Scrambling up she grabbed a Michelob bottle from a counter and broke it over his head. Booker dropped back on the bed motionless. Tightening her fist on the broken half of the bottle, Bride stared at the blood seeping into his left ear. A few seconds later he regained consciousness, leaned on his elbow and with squinty, unfocussed eyes turned to look at her.

"You walked out on me," she screamed. "Without a word! Nothing! Now I want that word. Whatever it is I want to hear it. Now!"

Booker, wiping blood with his right hand, snarled, "I don't have to tell you nothing."

"Oh, yes you do." She raised the broken bottle.

"You get out of my house before something bad happens."

"Shut up and answer me!"

"Jesus, woman."

"Why? I have to know, Booker."

"First you tell me why you bought presents for a child molester—in prison for it, for Christ's sake. Tell me why you forgave a freak."

"I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that."

The room temperature had not risen but Bride was sweating, her forehead, upper lip, even her armpits were soaking.

"You lied? What for?"

"So my mother would hold my hand!"

"What?"

"And look at me with smiling eyes, for once."

"Well, did she?"

"Yes. She even liked me."

"So, you mean to tell me---"

"Shut up and talk! Why did you dump me?"

"Oh, God." Booker sighed. "My brother, he was murdered by a monster, a predator ^{like the one you —} who —"

"I don't care! I didn't do it! It wasn't me who killed your brother."

"I know, ^{that} but---"

"But nothing. Here wipe your face." Bride threw a dishtowel toward him and

put down what was left of the beer bottle. After wiping her palms on her jeans and her damp forehead with the back of her hand, she looked steadily at Booker. "You

*I was trying to make up for somebody I hurt
you just ran around blaming every body.
Bastard.*

don't have to love me but you damn well have to respect me." She sat down and crossed her legs.

f

In a long silence cut only by the sound of their breathing they stared not at each other but away—at the floor, their hands, through the window.

At last Booker felt he had something definitive and vital to say, to explain, but when he opened his mouth the words weren't there. No matter. Bride was asleep, her chin pointing toward her chest, her long legs splayed.

She woke in sunshine from a sweet dreamlessness—deeper than drunkenness, deeper than any she had known. Not having slept in tk hours she felt more than rested and free of tension, she felt newly born. Rising up, she noticed Booker drinking coffee at the small pull-down table. She joined him and picked a strip of bacon from his plate and ate it. Then his toast.

"Want more?" Booker asked.

"No. No thanks."

"Coffee? Juice?"

"Well, coffee maybe."

"Sure."

Bride rubbed her eyes trying to replay the moments before she fell asleep. The swelling over Booker's ear helped her memory. "You got me over to the bed with one working arm?"

"I had help," said Booker.

"Who from?"

"Queen."

"Oh, God. She must think I'm crazy."

"Doubt it." Booker placed a cup of coffee before her. "She's an original. Doesn't recognize crazy."

Bride blew away the coffee's steam. "She showed me the things you sent her. Your writings. When I read them I knew they were all about me."

"Yeah. Everything is about you except the whole world and the universe it floats in."

"You know what I mean."

"They're just thoughts, Bride. Thoughts about what I felt or feared or, most often, what I truly believed--at the time."

"You still think heartbreak should burn like a star?"

"I do. But stars can explode, die."

MTK

"Say, how did you find me, anyway?"

"A letter came for you. An overdue bill, ^{I mean} rather, from a music repair place.

Sonny's Pawn. So I went there."

"Why?"

"To pay them, Booker. They told me where you were from. This so-called town."

"You drove all this way to slap my face?"

"Maybe. I didn't plan to. Anyway I brought you your trumpet."

"No! You got it?"

"It's fixed."

"Where is it? At Queen's?"

"No. In the trunk of my car."

Booker's smile traveled from his lips to his eyes. The joy in his face was infantile. "I love you," he said. "Love you!"

It began slowly, gently as it often does; shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way; tentative at first then gaining confidence in the ecstasy of air, of sunlight for there was neither in the weeds where it curled.

Smoke.

It had been lurking in the yard where Queen Olive had burned bedsprings to destroy the annual nest of bedbugs. Now it traveled quickly, flashing now and then a red lick of flame, then dying down for seconds before springing up again stronger,

thicker now that the way and the goal were clear: a tasty length of pine at the trailer's back steps. ^{two stairs}

By the time Bride and Booker got there, a small cluster of people was standing in front of Queen's trailer—the jobless, several children and the elderly. Smoke was sneaking from the sills and door saddle when Booker and Bride broke in. First Booker, then Bride dropped to the floor where smoke was thinnest and crawled to the couch where Queen lay lifeless. With his one arm and Bride's two, their eyes watering, and throats coughing they managed to roll the unconscious woman to the floor and drag her out to the front lawn.

"Further! Come on, further!" shouted one of the men. "The whole place could blow!"

Booker was too intent on forcing air into Queen's mouth to hear him. In the distance the sirens of fire truck and ambulance excited the children. Suddenly a spark hiding in Queen's hair burst into flame, devouring the mass of red hair in a blink. Bride pulled off her t shirt and used it to smother the head fire. When, with stinging, singed palms, she pulled away the now sooty, smoking shirt, she bit her lip at the sight of a few tufts of hair hard to distinguish from the puckering scalp. All the while, Booker was whispering, "Yeah, yeah. Come on love, come on baby." Queen was breathing—at least coughing and vomiting, a major sign of life.

The crowd was bigger now and seemed transfixed, staring, but not at the patient being trundled into the ambulance. They were focused, wide-eyed on Bride's lovely, plump breasts. However intrigued the onlookers were it was zero

compared to Bride's delight. So much so she delayed accepting the blanket the medical technician held toward her until she saw the look on Booker's face.

Once Queen was admitted, Bride spent the days with her, Booker the nights, three of which passed before Queen opened her eyes. Head bandaged, its contents drugged, she recognized neither of her rescuers. All they were able to do was watch the tubes, one clear as glass turning like a rainforest vine, others thin as telephone wire, all secondary to the cup over her mouth's rasp.

MTK

Queen dies; her open eyes make them ~~all~~ doubt it; waiting days for he cremation to be completed, they take refuge in each other's arms.

Booker tosses Queen's ashes in river; plays a few bars on his trumpet—awful and out of tune. *his language, his shield, his only relief from Adam's shadow ^{now} distorted, burned, useless.*
Sits on riverbank, hands crossed, head lowered. Bride waits in the car.

Finally he joins her. They are quiet for a while then Bride says,

"I'm pregnant."

"What did you say?"

""You heard me. I'm pregnant and it's yours."

Booker gazed at her, looks away then back. ~~Says~~, "No." *He said.* "It's ours."

Bride and Booker

He took her hand. Fingers entwined ~~they~~ leaned back on the headrests and let their spines sink into the seat's soft hide of cattle. Occasionally they turned to search the eyes of the other ^{AND ~~saw~~ there} seeing only goodness.

A child. New life. Innocent. Knowing nothing of death, unsullied by memories of mangled boys, ^{tortured} rose tattoos, no shades of an unborn twin, no dangerous lies told to earn love; no hasty oblivious romances, ^{camp above} ~~minus~~ vanity, cowardice, missing body parts and disappointing families.

They believe.

A child. New life. Innocent. Immune to evil or illness; protected from kidnap, beatings, molestation, bullets, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error.

⁹
~~Or~~ so they believe.