



## "Now, sleepless and waiting..."

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Now, sleepless and waiting for <sup>the</sup> her headache to subside,  
<sup>my</sup> Bride's thoughts drifted. What if it was the landlord <sup>my</sup> her finger was  
 pointing toward in that courtroom—the idea of him, his <sup>nastiness</sup> brutality and  
 the curse he threw at <sup>me</sup> her. She had never heard the word before, but  
 its revulsion and its hatred did not need definition. Nor did other  
 forms of the curse <sup>s</sup> or the mysterious yet pointed language of a few  
 classmates: ugga booga, topsy, clinker top. <sup>They were</sup> The curses became  
 septic, coursing through <sup>my</sup> her veins for years without antibiotics. Not  
 being a disowned 'little nigger girl' <sup>drove me</sup> was her driving force thereafter.  
 And she managed to develop <sup>my</sup> her own antibiotic with determination  
 and skill. <sup>I became</sup> So becoming a deep black beauty, <sup>and sold my</sup> selling her elegance to  
<sup>those childhood ghosts</sup> the ghosts of childhood tormenters, <sup>I have to say it's</sup> was more than pay back, it was  
 glory.

The next day she woke from a restless sleep feeling fresh and  
 energetic enough to attempt a few chores. Booker's cloth bag hung  
 in the hall closet and it was surely time to toss it.

her but more than that it was disturbing. Turning to another page, she  
read "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."

Rummaging through the bag he'd left, Bride ignored the book  
in German, <sup>skipped</sup> 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~~ <sup>my</sup> and finding  
none she began to try reading the handwriting. It was so tiny she had  
to squint to read it. The notebook was small, about four inches by  
two and a half and worn. Instead of addresses it was full of long  
sentences like that. What she had just read was incomprehensible to



her but more than that it was disturbing. Turning 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."

What the hell is he talking about, she wondered, then, in a whisper, "I thought I knew him." That he had degrees from some university she knew. He owned a t-shirt that said so, but she couldn't remember it and had never asked him about that part of his life because what was important, aside from her confessions and his deep understanding, were their dates, the clubs she dragged him to, the envious looks they provoked when together. More than

understanding was love-making. She had learned that serious conversation with a boyfriend had to be punctuated with jokes, sarcasm, flirting or it led to disagreements, argument and break-ups. But with him she could actually talk, say what she herself thought. Although it was also true that when he spoke at length it was not intimate—it was more like a lecture. Once when they were resting in beach chairs at the shore, Booker began talking to her about the history of water in California. A bit boring, yes, but Bride was not uninterested, really. Still, she fell asleep. She had no idea what occupied him while she was at her office, but obviously writing garbled notes was one thing he did. And after everything in her heart she'd lavished on him, he told her nothing about himself. She talked; he listened. Then he ran, split, left without a word. Mocking her exactly as Sofia Huxley had. Neither had mentioned marriage but she believed she had found her guy. "You are not the woman..." was the last thing she expected to hear.



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 Mr. B Reid. She tore it open. A musical instrument repair shop; the item was ready; had been for weeks; would he pick it up or 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 instrument 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 retrieved 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, sure, but after the launch. The sample 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. Between admiring her long



beautifully shaped legs and fingering her virgin 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. But it hurt bad and she couldn't let him get away with that.

Where was that notice about a trumpet being ready?

## END OF CHAPTER ONE



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

Obviously her life wasn't working. The pieces of it that she had  
stitched together—personal glamour, control in an exciting even

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  
in Booker's 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  
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 even creative 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?"

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



Too cowardly to defy Dearest or the landlord or Sofia, there was one person still available whom 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.

That is what one of his notes had been about.

"The antidote to the treason of emotional stupidity which invades the mind like mould so un-scrape-able, so un-washable the structure itself must be demolished to make space for what is true regardless of the suffering that the rubble's collapse may cause and bury the antidote: truth and clarity are what we are made for as surely as trumpets are made to thrill."

Arrogant fuck, thought Bride. Who does he think he is? While she was baring her soul to him, he was mocking her.

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, hamlets 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 on Bride left the highway and turned into the oasis.

The diner was spotless in spite of the odor of beer and pipe tobacco. Over the counter a Confederate flag nestled the Stars and Stripes.

"Ma'am?" The counter waitress's eyes were wide, roving.

"May I have a white omelet, no cheese?"

"White? You mean no eggs?"

"No. No yolks."

Following that trailer park version of a white egg omelet, Bride went into the ladies' room. Standing at the sink mirror she noticed the neckline of her cashmere dress was askew, slanting down over her left shoulder. Adjusting it, she saw that the shoulder slide was due neither to poor posture nor a manufacturing flaw. The top of the dress sagged as if she had purchased a size 4 and should have

selected a 1. 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 waitress turned cashier Bride asked directions to Whiskey.

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

Bride could feel the rake of the girl's gaze as she left the diner and wondered if it was possible the girl had never seen a black person before.

Is that what backwoods people called 'not far' she wondered. Having gassed up, had the tires checked and followed the turn into route tk, Bride turned right at exit tk. It was dark by the time she saw the exit 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 high beam 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. Stretching and twisting she managed to retrieve 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 owls. It frightened nothing because it made no sound. She lay there the rest of the night by turns afraid, furious, exhausted. Mostly she felt world-hurt, an awareness of malign forces changing her from a would-be conqueror of her life into a fugitive within it.

The sun merely hinted at its rise, teasing the sky with a promise of revealing its whole self instead of an orange slice. Bride, weak and teary from body cramp and leg pain, felt a tingle of hope. A wagon, a truck full of loggers, 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, bone white face appeared at the passenger's side window. A girl, young, carrying a basket 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. Was she hallucinating? If not, surely the girl had gone for help. Nobody, not the mentally disabled or the genetically violent would leave her there. Would they?

Suddenly, as they had not during the night, the tall trees scared her and the silence was terrifying. 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 peered into the window and went around to the

driver's door. When he yanked it open her scream startled them

both. Carefully he eased her foot from under the brake pedal and

free of the car's smashed door. With the emerald-eyed girl tagging

along, he carried Bride half a mile down a sandy 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 in her

furry boot was 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, he said, but there was a chance it wasn't too early for the single doctor in the area to be found. It wasn't a sprain, he said. The ankle appeared to be broken. 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." For the first time her concocted name didn't sound hip. It sounded stupid.

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

"Thank you Raisin. You saved my life. Really." Bride, grateful for another stupid name, let a tear sting its way down her cheek touching a smile.



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

Bride declined. She just wanted to take a nap she said.

Evelyn covered her with a blanket and did not trouble to whisper the black-white kitten conversation as she moved toward the sink. She was a tall woman with unfashionable hips and a long chestnut braid swinging 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 Raisin, on the other hand, resembled no one Bride had ever seen: paper white skin, ebony hair, neon eyes, undetermined age. What had Evelyn said? "That's where she was when we found her." In the rain.

Steve and Evelyn's house seemed to be a converted studio or workshop: one large room containing table, chairs, sink, wood burning stove and the scratchy worn couch Bride lay on. Above it all, a skylight that needed a good power cleaning. Throughout the room light, unaided by electricity, moved like water—a shadow here gone in an instant, a shaft hitting a copper pot might take minutes to dissolve. An open door to the rear revealed another room where two beds, one of rope another of iron stood. Something meaty, like chicken, roasted in the oven while mother and daughter chopped mushrooms and green peppers at the obviously home made table. Without warning they began to sing. 'Let the sunshine in....'

Bride quickly dashed a borning memory of Dearest humming some blues song while rinsing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann looking on.

Eventually she did fall asleep only to be awakened by Steve accompanied by a very old, very rumped doctor.



"This is Walt," said Steve.

"Doctor Muskie, MD, PhD, LLD, DDT, OMB...."

"He's joking." Steve laughed.

Bride sucked air through her teeth as the doctor sliced through her beautiful white boot. Expertly and without pity he examined her ankle and announced it 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 clean and 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 as they drove back from the clinic she had to admit the cast had eased her pain, as had the pills.

Whiskey Clinic was across the road from a post office situated in a charming sea blue clapboard house that also contained a barbershop. Quaint, thought Bride, expecting to be helped into an equally quaint examination room. To her surprise the equipment was as cutting edge as could be. Dr. Muskie smiled at her astonishment.

"Loggers are like soldiers," he said, washing his hands. "They have the worst wounds and need the best and quickest care."

Thirty minutes later she was in the truck sitting next to a silent Steve lost, apparently, in his own thoughts.

Back in the house her earlier hunger dissipated as the awareness of being unwashed overtook it.

"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."

Slop jar, outhouse, zinc tub, flies, rope bed. Bride started to cry, and they let her while they all ate supper.



Later, trying to overcome embarrassment, she roused herself to accept the plate Evelyn held before her. Quail as it turned out, not chicken, with sumptuous mushroom gravy. Following the meal, more than embarrassment, 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 while waiting for the Jaguar to be repaired Bride learned that her hosts were 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 cheek, 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?"

When Doctor Muskie 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 the zinc tub, handed her a sponge and a bar of hard brown soap. Bride sank into the water with profound gratitude, prolonging the soaping until the water had cooled



completely. It was when she stood to dry herself 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.

"It took a while to get the whole story," Evelyn said. She was sipping moonshine from a tin cup.

Bride listened intently. Anything, anything to stop thinking first about how her body was changing—shrinking—and second how nobody seemed to notice. She had spectacular breasts when she was rescued from the Jaguar; she had them in Whiskey Clinic. Now they were gone, like a botched mastectomy that left the nipples intact. And she was shocked to discover that her pubic hair was not simply gone; the area was as smooth as her earlobes. Nothing hurt; her organs worked as usual. So what kind of illness was this? Both visible and invisible.

"You sure you don't want some"? Evelyn raised the bottle.

"Thanks, no."

They were sitting in the backyard on a stone bench. Sunset polished their skin while trees accepted flocks of black birds on their trembling leaves. Gusts of wind bent the heads of marigolds. Bride wore Evelyn's jeans that her host said were too small now and one of Steve's flannel shirts. In too big tennis shoes, her ankle tightly taped, Bride listened carefully.

"What did you mean by finding her in the rain?"

"We did. Steve and me. We saw this child shivering wet on a brick doorstep and stopped the van. Steve went over to her. Both of us thought she was lost or her door key was."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. She turned her head away when Steve squatted down in front of her. When he touched her arm she jumped up and ran off. He got back in the van and we went on about our business.



The rain got so hard we had trouble seeing through the windshield.

So we called it quits and parked near a diner. Bruno's it was called.

Anyway, rather than wait in the van we went inside."

"So, you lost her?"

"Then. Yes."

"Did she come back?"

"No, but when the rain let up and we left the diner I spotted her hunched up next to a dumpster behind the diner."

"Jesus."

"It was Steve who decided. He just went over and grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder. She was screaming Kidnap! But not too loud. I don't think she wanted attention, especially from pigs, I mean police."

"If she didn't want police and she didn't want attention, what was she afraid of?"

"A lot, it turned out."

Bride's stomach fluttered. "Was she beaten, then? Abused in some way?"

"You could say that."

"What then?"

"Rented."

Evelyn said it took a month to put together from bits, questions, outbursts, shocking language no child should understand, most of the story. Rain, Raisin—she never learned the girl's real name and wondered if she had even been given one since she might as well have been a used lawn mower in a shop window.

"Her mother?"

"Yep. A druggie, I think. Leased her baby to men interested in safety."