



God Help the Child Draft, as "Bride Anew"

No Known Copyright

Princeton University Library reasonably believes that the Item is not restricted by copyright or related rights, but a conclusive determination could not be made.

You are free to use this Item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use.

Princeton University Library Disclaimer

Princeton University Library claims no copyright governing this digital resource. It is provided for free, on a non-commercial, open-access basis, for fair-use academic and research purposes only. Anyone who claims copyright over any part of these resources and feels that they should not be presented in this manner is invited to contact Princeton University Library, who will in turn consider such concerns and make every effort to respond appropriately. We request that users reproducing this resource cite it according the guidelines described at <http://rbcs.princeton.edu/policies/forms-citation>.

Citation Information

Morrison, Toni. 1931-

God Help the Child Draft, as "Bride Anew"

1 folder

Contact Information

Download Information

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:22:50 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/nv935744b>

Revised
May 18 (on PR
computer
via email)

1

GOODNESS [October 7]

December 22 revised Chapter One

BRIDE ANEW

Chapone

gone
(These changes are my body)

I am disappearing here. Bit by bit parts of me are fading. It didn't

start right away and it has taken me a long time to know the reason for
certain. But I believe it ^{started} began when he said, "You not the woman I want."

"Neither am I," I answered. Oh, don't ask. I can't think why I said that but

he shot me a strange look before putting on his jeans. ^{hearing my} ~~Yet it was~~ when he slipped into ^{sad}
his ~~loafers~~ ^{boots and} and grabbed his t-shirt ^{and when I heard the door slam} that I wondered if he was not just ending our silly

argument, but ending us, our relationship. I assumed that later that evening I would
hear the key turn, the door click open and close. But nothing. What? I'm not exciting

enough? I can't have thoughts of my own? By morning I was furious. Glad he was

gone. ^{Sorry} ~~It was as though~~ I had spent those ^{you would have thought} ~~three~~ ^{six} months in a holding cell without

arraignment or a lawyer, and suddenly the judge called the whole thing off—dismissed

the case or refused to hear it at all. ^{Anyway} I refused to whine, wail or accuse. He said one

thing I agreed. Fuck him. Besides, the affair wasn't all that spectacular not even the

mildly dangerous sex I used to like. In any case it was nothing like those double page

spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf looking so

1

fierce and downright mean, their sexuality like lightening and the sky going dark to show off the shine of their skin. I love those ads. But our affair didn't even measure up to any old R and B song—some red and black tune with a beat arranged to generate fever. It wasn't even the sugary lyrics of a thirties blues song: "Baby, baby, why you treat me so? I do anything you say, go anywhere you want me to go." Why I ^{kept} was comparing us to magazine spreads and music, I ^{can't} couldn't say, but it tickled me to settle on "I Wanna Dance with Somebody."

It was raining ^{next day} in the morning. Bullet taps on the windows followed by crystal lines of water. I refused to glance through the windows at the sidewalk beneath my condo. I fought giving in to the ^{hope} possibility that he was coming back. Besides I knew what was there—palm trees lining the road, ^{down} benches in the little park, few if any pedestrians. I just opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio and sank into the sofa, its suede and silk cushions as comfy as any arms. Almost. Because I have to admit he ^{is a} was beautiful, ^{man} flawless even except for the ugly scar on his shoulder—a plum red blob with a tail. A little ^(over) buzzed, I decided to call Norma, tell her all about it. But I changed my mind when I realized there was nothing to say except he walked out and I don't know why. Besides, there was too much going on at work for me to distract my best friend and colleague with personal gossip about another

How he hit me harder than a fist with six words.
How they ~~knocked~~ rattled me so I agreed with him.

breakup. Especially now. Being Regional Manager is like being a captain so I have to maintain the right relationship with the crew. Our company, Sylvia Inc., is a small cosmetic business, but it's beginning to blossom and make waves, finally, and shed its frumpy past. It used to be Sylph Corsets for Discriminating Women ^{back} in the forties, but changed its name and ownership to Sylvia Apparel, then to Sylvia Inc before going ^{flat out} cool with six cosmetics lines one of which is mine. I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics for your Personal Millennium. It's for girls and women of all complexions from ebony to lemonade to milk. ^{And it's} ~~That's~~ mine, all mine—the idea, the ^{brand} ~~name~~, the packaging.

Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn't help smiling at the lipstick smile on ^{my} ~~the~~ wine glass, thinking "How you like that, Lula Ann?" Maybe that was the woman he wanted. But Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was a seventeen-year old me who dropped that country name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia Inc and, on a hunch, shortened my name to Bride with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one memorable syllable. Customers and reps like it, but he did not. He called me "baby" most of the time. "Hey, baby," "Come

on, baby." And sometime "You my girl", accent on the "my." The only time he said "woman" was the day he split.

*The more
white wine the more I thought*
"Good riddance." No more dallying with a mystery man with no visible means of support. An ex-felon if ever there was one though he laughed when I teased him about how he spent his time when I was at the office: idle? Roaming? Or meeting someone? He said his weekly meetings downtown were not reports to a probation officer or drug re-hab counselor. Yet he never told me what they were. I told him every single thing about myself; he confided nothing so I just made stuff up with tv plots: he was an informant with a new identity, a disbarred lawyer. Whatever.

Actually the timing of his leaving was perfect for me. With him gone out of my life and my apartment I could concentrate on the launch of YOU, GIRL and, most important, keep a promise I'd made to myself long before I met him—we argued about it the night before "You not the woman...." According to prisoninfo.org/paroleboard/calendar, it was time. I'd been planning this trip for a year choosing carefully what a parolee would need: I saved up twenty-five thousand dollars in cash, a three thousand dollar

d

Continental Airlines gift certificate. I put a promotion box of YOU GIRL into a brand new Louis Vuitton shopping bag, all of which could take her ^{an ex-felon} anywhere. Comfort her anyway; help her forget and take the edge off bad luck, hopelessness and boredom. Well, maybe not boredom, no prison is a convent. He didn't understand ^{why I was so determined} and the day after our ^{quarrel} fight about my promise he left. I must have threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him. Bastard. ^(over) _h

You ought to be able to enjoy scenery this lovely but the highways are so thick with lanes, exits, parallel roads, overpasses, cautionary signals and signs it was like reading a newspaper while driving. Annoying. Along with Amber alerts, silver and gold ones were springing up. I stayed in the right lane and slowed down because from past experience I knew the Norristown exit was easy to miss and the prison had no sign of its existence in the world for a mile beyond the exit ramp. I guess they didn't want tourists to know that some of the reclaimed desert California is famous for holds evil women. Decagon Women's Prison, right outside Norristown, is owned by a private company worshipped by the locals for the work it provides: serving visitors, guards, clerical staff, cafeteria workers, health care folks and most of all contract laborers repairing the road and fences

I paid the rent. I bought him beautiful
shirts (although he never wore them) and
did all the shopping. Besides, a promise
is a promise. especially if its to ones self.

and adding wing after wing to house increasing waves of violent wicked women committing bloody female crimes. Lucky for the state, crime does pay.

The couple of times I drove to Decagon before I never tried to get inside on some pretext or other. Then I just wanted to see where the monster had been caged for fifteen of her twenty-five to life sentence. This time was different. The monster has been granted parole and according to Penal Review Notices, Sofia Huxley is going to strut through the bars I pushed her behind.

You'd think with Decagon being all about money that a Jaguar wouldn't stand out. But behind curbside busses, old Toyotas and second hand trucks, my car, sleek, rat gray with a vanity license looked like a gun. But not as sinister as the white limousines I've seen parked there—engines snoring, chauffeurs leaning against gleaming fenders. Now, who would need a driver leaping to open the door and make a quick getaway? A grand Madam impatient to get back to her designer linens in her tasteful high-rise brothel? Or maybe a little hooker-ette eager to get bak to the patio of some sumptuous, degenerate, private club where she could celebrate her

release among friends by ripping up her prison-issue underwear. No Sylvia Inc products for her. Our line is sexy enough but not expensive enough. Like all sex trash ^{the little hooker-cite would think} she thought the higher the price the better the quality. If she only knew. Still, she might buy some YOU, Girl sparkle eye shadow or gold-flecked lip gloss.

No limousines today, unless you count the Lincoln Town car. Mostly just worn cars and trucks, jittery grown ups and quiet children. An old man sitting at the bus stop is digging into a box of Cheerios trying to find the last circle of sweet oat bran. He's wearing ancient wing-tip shoes and crisp new jeans. His baseball cap, his brown vest over a white shirt scream Salvation Army Store but his manner is superior, dainty even. His legs are crossed and he examines the bit of dry cereal as though it were a choice grape picked especially for him by groundskeepers to the throne.

Four o'clock; it won't be long now. Huxley, Sofia, aka 071140 won't be released during visiting hours. ~~She and if there are other parolees will come out as a separate group.~~ At exactly four thirty only the Town car is left, owned probably by a lawyer with an alligator brief case full of ^{paper} words, money and cigarettes. (over)

The cigarettes for his client
The money for witnesses
The papers to look like he was working

"Are you ok, Lula Ann?" The prosecutor's voice was soft,
(but I could hardly hear her)
 encouraging. "There's nothing to be afraid of. She can't hurt you."

No, she can't and here she is. *Number* Miss 0071140. Even after fifteen years
 I could never mistake her simply because of her height, six feet. Nothing
 has shrunk the giant I remember who was taller than the bailiff, the judge,
 the lawyers and almost as tall as the police. Only her co-monster husband
 matched her height. Nobody doubted she was the filthy freak the parents
 called her. "Look at her eyes," they whispered. Everywhere in the
 courthouse, ladies' room, benches, halls they whispered: "Cold, like the
 snake she is." "At twenty? How could a twenty-year old do those things to
 children?" "Are you kidding? Just look at those eyes. Old as dirt."

Now those eyes are more like a rabbit's than a snake's but the height
 is the same. A whole lot else has changed. She is as thin as a rope. Size 1
 panties; an A-cup bra, if any. And she could sure use some Glam Glo.
 Formalize Wrinkle Softener and Juicy Bronze would give color to the whey
 color of her skin.

When I step out of the Jaguar I don't wonder or care whether she
 recognizes me. I just walk over to her and say, "Need a lift?"

She throws me a quick, uninterested glance and turns her gaze to the road. "No. Thanks. I don't."

Her mouth is tremble-y. It used to be hard, a straight razor sharpened to slice a kid. A collagen shot and Tango-Matte, not glitter, would have softened her lips and maybe influenced the jury in her favor except there was no YOU, Girl back then.

"Somebody picking you up?"

"Taxi," she says. Funny. She is answering a stranger dutifully like she's 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."

When I come closer and reach out to touch her arm the cab rolls up and, fast as a bullet she grabs the door handle, tosses in her little carrier bag and slams the door shut. I bang on the window shouting, "Wait! Wait!" Too late. The driver negotiates the U turn like a NASCAR pro.

Following them isn't hard. I even pass the taxi to disguise the fact that I am tailing her. That turns out to be a mistake. In the rear view mirror I see the taxi slow then turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp

beyond. Gravel pings my wheels as I brake, reverse and catch up. The road to Norristown is lined with neat, colorful houses built in the fifties and added on repeatedly—a closed side porch, a garage expanded for two cars, back yard patio. The road looks like a kindergarten drawing of light blue, white, yellow houses with pine green or beet-red doors sitting quietly in wide lawns. All that is missing is a pancake sun with ray sticks all around it. ^{Beyond} When the road leaves the houses ~~behind~~ ^{sign} a mall, as pale and sad as 'lite' beer, ~~a sign~~ announces the beginning of the town. Next to it another, bigger sign for Eva Dean's Motel and Restaurant. The taxi turns and stops by the entrance. I follow and park a ways back near the restaurant. I am sure she is meeting someone, but after a few minutes at the check-in desk, she goes straight to the restaurant and takes a seat by the window. I can see her clearly and watch her study the menu like a remedial or English-as-second language student—lip reading, running her finger over the items. What a change. This is the teacher who had first graders cut apples into rings to shape the letter O, doled out pretzels as B's, slit watermelon chunks into Y's. All to spell BOY—who she liked best according to the women whispering in front of the sinks in the ladies' room. Fruit as bait was a big part of trial testimony.

beyond. Gravel pits, my father said, broke the view and stopped the road.
 to them. I was lined with neat, colorful houses built in the old style. It
 avoided on the road. A dirt road, a dirt road, a dirt road, a dirt road, a dirt road.
 back and forth. The road looks like a black giant, now in a light blue
 white, slow down with one foot on the road, a black giant, a black giant.
 wide, slow down with one foot on the road, a black giant, a black giant.

Only one ^{other} car in the Parking area - a black SUV

Look at her eat. The waitress keeps placing plate after plate in front of her. Makes sense, sort of, this first out of prison meal. She's gobbling like a refugee, like somebody floating at sea without food or water for weeks and just about to wonder what harm it would do to his dying boat mate to taste his flesh before it shrank. She never takes her eyes from the food, stabbing, slicing, scooping, helter-skelter among the dishes. She drinks no water, butters no bread as though nothing is allowed to delay her speed eating. The whole thing is over in ten or eleven minutes. Then she pays, leaves and hurries down the walkway. Now what? Key in hand, tote bag on her shoulder, she stops and turns into a break between two stucco walls. I get out of the car and walk-run behind her until I hear the retching sounds of vomit. So I hide behind ^{the lone} a SUV until she comes out.

^{is on the door she unlocks.}
3 A. I'm ready. I make sure my knock is authoritative, strong but not threatening.

"Yes?" Her voice is shaky, the humble sound of someone trained to automatic obedience.

"Mrs. Huxley. Open the door please"

There is silence then, "I uh. I'm sorta sick."

"I know," I say. A trace of judgment in my voice, hoping she thinks it's about the sick she left on the pavement. "Open the door."

She opens it and stands there barefoot with a towel in her hand. She wipes her mouth. "Yes?"

"We need to talk."

"Talk?" She blinks rapidly but doesn't ask the real question—"Who are you?"

I push past her leading with the Louis Vuitton bag. "You're Sofia Huxley, right?"

She nods. A tiny flash of fear is in her eyes. I want to calm her so I hold up the shopping bag and say, "Come on. Let's sit down. I have something for you." She doesn't look at the bag; she stares at my shoes with their high lethal heels and dangerously pointed toes.

"What do you want me to do?" she asks. Such a soft accommodating voice. Knowing after fifteen years behind bars that nothing is free. Nobody gives away anything at no cost to the receiver. Whatever it is: cigarettes,

magazines, tampons, stamps, Mars Bars or a jar of peanut butter, it comes with strings tough as fishing line.

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

Now her eyes stray from my shoes to my face, opaque eyes without inquiry. So I answer 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?" She frowns.

"Me. Yes."

"I know you?"

"My name is Bride."

She squints. "That supposed to mean something to me?"

"No," I say and smile. "Look what I brought you." I can't resist and place the bag on the bed. I reach inside and on top of the gift package of YOU, Girl I lay two envelopes—the slim one with an airline gift certificate then the fat one with twenty-five thousand dollars. A thousand for each year had she served her full sentence.

Sofia stares at the display as though the items might be infected.

"What's all that for?"

I wonder if prison has done something to her brain. "It's Okay," I say. "Just a few things to help you."

"Help me what?"

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

"My life?" Something is wrong. She sounds as if she needs an introduction to the word.

"Yeah." I am still smiling. "Your new life."

"Why? Who sent you?"

"I guess you don't remember me. Why would you? Lula Ann. Lula Ann Bridewell. At the trial? I was one of the children who...."

I search through the blood with my tongue. My teeth are all there, but I can't seem to get up. I can feel my left eyelid shutting down and my right arm is dead. The door opens and all the gifts I brought are thrown at me, one by one including the Vuitton bag. The door slams shut then opens again. My black spike-heeled shoe lands on my back before rolling off next

to my left arm. I reach for it and am relieved to learn that, unlike the right one, this one can move. I try to scream 'help', but my mouth belongs to somebody else. I crawl a few feet and try to stand. My legs work, so I gather up the gifts, push them into the bag and one shoe on, one left behind, limp to my car. I don't feel anything. I don't think anything. Not until I see my face in the side view mirror. My mouth looks as though it's stuffed with raw liver; the whole side of my face is scraped of skin; my right eye is a mushroom. All I want to do is get away from here—no 911, it takes too long and I don't want some ignorant motel manager staring at me. Police. There has to be some in this town. Igniting, shifting, steering with a left hand, while the other one lies dead next to my thigh takes concentration. All of it. So it's not until I get further into Norristown and see a sign with an arrow pointing to the station that it hits me—the police will write a report, interview the accused and take a picture of my wrecked face as evidence. And what if the local newspaper gets the story along with my photograph. Embarrassment would be nothing next to the jokes directed at YOU, Girl. From YOU, Girl to BOO, Girl.

Hammers of pain make it hard to get out my cell phone and dial the one person I trust. Completely.

NORMA

She's lying. We are sitting in this dump of a clinic after I've driven over two hours to find this hick town, then ^{I have to} locate her Jaguar parked in the rear of a closed shut police station. Of course it's closed; it's Sunday when only churches and Wal-Mart are open. She was hysterical when I found her bloody and crying out of one eye, the other one too swollen to shed water. Poor thing. Somebody ruined one of those eyes, the ones that spooked everybody with their strangeness—large, slanted, slightly hooded and oddly colored considering how black her skin is. Alien eyes, I call them but guys think they're gorgeous, of course.

Well, when I find this little emergency clinic facing the mall's parking lot I have to hold her up to walk. She hobbles wearing one shoe. We get a nurse's startled attention and sit down to wait for the on call doctor who

lives, I don't know, in some other crappy town. Bride doesn't say a word while I drive her here, but in the waiting room she starts the lie.

"I'm ruined," she whispers.

I say, "No you're not. Give it time. Remember what Grace looked like after her face tuck?"

"A surgeon did her face," she answers. "A maniac did mine.

I press her. "So tell me. What happened, Bride? Who was he?"

"Who was who?" She touches her nose, tenderly.

"The guy who beat you half to death."

"Did I say it was a guy? I don't remember saying it was a guy."

"Are you telling me a woman did this?"

"No," she says. "No. It was a guy."

"Was he trying to rape you?"

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

See what I mean? Not even a good lie. I push a bit more. "He didn't take your purse, wallet anything?"

She mumbles, "Boy Scout, I guess." Her lips are puffy and her tongue can't manage consonants but she tries to smile at her own joke.

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

"I don't know! I don't know! I don't know!"

She is shouting now and faking sobbing so I back off. Her single open eye isn't up to it and her mouth must hurt too much to keep it up. For five minutes I don't say a word, then I try to make my voice sound as normal and conversational as I can.

"What were you doing up here anyway?"

"I came to see a friend."

"In Norristown?"

"No. Nearby."

"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."

She knows I know she is lying. Why would an ^{attacker} eager rapist not take her money? Something has rattled her brainpan otherwise why would she tell me such a barefaced lie? When I stuffed her little white skirt and top into the shopping bag, I found twenty-five hundred dollar bills, an airline gift certificate and samples of YOU, Girl not yet launched. Okay. No specie of would-be rapist would want Nude Skin Glo, but free cash? I decide to let it go and wait until she's seen the doctor.

Afterwards, when Bride holds up my compact mirror to her face, I know what she sees will break her heart. A quarter of her face is fine: the rest is cratered. Ugly black stitches, puffy eye, bandages on her forehead, lips so Ubangi she can't pronounce the 'r' in 'raw' which is what her skin looks like—all pink and dull black. Worse than anything is her nose—nostrils wide as an orangutan's under gauze

the size of half a bagel. Her un-bruised eye seems to cower, bloodshot, practically dead.

I shouldn't be thinking this. But her position at Sylvia Inc might be up for grabs. How can she persuade women to improve their looks with products that can't improve her own? There isn't enough foundation in the world to hide eye scars, a broken nose and facial skin scraped down to pink hypoderm. Assuming much of the damage fades she will still need plastic surgery, which means weeks and weeks of idleness, hiding behind glasses and floppy hats. I might be asked to take over. Temporarily, of course.

"I can't eat; I can't talk; I can't think."

Her voice is whiney and she is shaking.

I put my arm around her and whisper, "Hey, girlfriend, no pity party. Let's get out of this dump. They don't even have private rooms and that nurse had lettuce in her teeth and I doubt she's washed her hands since graduating from that online nursing course she took."

Bride stops shaking and asks me, "You don't think that doctor did a good job?"

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

"Don't they have to release me?" She sounds like a ten year old.

"Please. We're leaving. Now. Look what I bought while you were being patched up. Sweats and flip-flops. No decent hospital in these parts but a very respectable Wal-Mart. Come on. Up. Lean on me. Where did Florence Nightingale put your things? We'll get some ice pops or slurries on the way. Or a milkshake. That's probably better medicine-wise or some tomato juice, chicken broth maybe."

I'm rambling, fussing with pills and clothes while she clutches that ugly flowered hospital gown. "Oh, Bride." I say but my voice cracks. "Don't look like that; it's going to be all right."

I have to drive slowly; every bump or sudden lane switch makes her wince or grunt. I try to get her mind off her pain.

"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."

She doesn't answer, so I keep on trying to get a smile out of her. "But your good eye looks twenty-two."

It doesn't work. What the hell. I might as well be talking to myself. I decide to just get her home and settled. I'll take care of everything at work. Bride will be on sick leave for a long time and somebody has to take on her responsibilities. Me. And who knows how that might turn out?

DEAREST

I don't know how it happened. I'm light-skinned and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin. It's different—straight but curly like those tribes in Australia. And I always thought her lips were ~~a little~~ ^{Folks said} too thick. [^] She must be a throwback, but throwback to what? My grandmother passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from them she sent right back, unopened. ^(over) [^]

I hate to say it but from the very beginning she embarrassed me. People stared when I pushed her in the baby carriage and later on when we walked down the street together. I could have been the baby sitter if ^{over} the colors ^{was} ~~were~~ reversed. I stopped taking her with me ^{a place to live} especially when I had to look for an apartment. It was hard enough just being a colored woman—light brown like her father—trying to ^{a decent} rent in ^(over 2) this part of the city. And if it wasn't enough being that dark, ^{Something witchy about them too} she had funny colored eyes. I know that's what did it; what caused

1 Almost all mulatto types did that ^{back} ^{right hand of} then in the twenties - if they had the hair, that is. Lula Ann got the right hair on her head [^] but she locked out on skin.

2 Back in the eighties when she was born ~~there was a~~ ^{the} law against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out. But I got lucky with Mr. Laine ^(?). I know he upped the rent ^{extra} five dollars and he has a fit if you a minute late.

^{loud}
 the fights between me and my husband. It got so bad he just up and
[^] And I had to look for another place to live.
 left. I never did convince him that I aint never, ever fooled around

with another man. He was dead sure I was lying and treated Lula

Ann like she came from a stranger. Not just a stranger—an enemy.

He never touched her and if I felt his coldness, she must of froze in it.

So it was just us two. He must of felt real bad leaving us like that
^{found out where I moved to and}
 because a few months later on he started sending me money every
[^]
 month though I never asked him to and didn't go to court to get it.

That and my night work at the hospital's janitorial service kept me
 and her off welfare.

In the end she made me proud as a peacock. It was in that case with
^{that gang of}
~~the~~ pervert teachers that she knocked it out of the park. Little as she
 was, she behaved like a grown up on the stand—so calm and sure of
 herself—and put the noose, so to speak, around that sinful woman's
 neck. It was in the papers and all. After that I walked the streets
 holding her hand, so proud I was.

^{Call on}
[^]
 She don't come around anymore. She sends me money and stuff
 every now and then but I aint seen her in I don't know how long.

BRIDE

She really was a freak. Sofia Huxley. ~~The eyes~~. The quick change from dutiful, obedient ex-con to feral predator. From slack-lipped to fangs. From slouch to ^{hammer} spear. I never saw the signal—no grip of neck cords, no shoulder flex. Nothing announced her onslaught. I'll never forget it and even if I tried to the scars wouldn't let me.

Memory is the worst thing about healing. I lie around all day with nothing urgent to do. Norma has taken care of explanations to the office staff: attempted rape, foiled, blah, blah. She is a true friend and doesn't annoy me like those so-called friends who come just to gaze and pity me. Television is idiotic—mostly death, lipstick and the thighs of anchor girls[®] (over)

How can I take seriously
~~crime~~ ~~detective~~ ~~show~~ ~~track~~ ~~killers~~ ~~where~~ ~~the~~ ~~women~~ ~~detectives~~
heels.

Memory is the worst thing about me. I lie around all day with
nothing urgent to do. Norma has taken care of explanations to the office
staff. She's a true friend and doesn't
annoy me like those so-called friends who come just to gaze and pry me
Television is idiotic—mostly death, lipstick and the thighs of anchor girls.

print makes me dizzy and I don't like listening to music anymore. Vocals, both the beautiful and the mediocre, depress me and instrumentals are worse. Plus something bad has been done to my tongue because my taste buds have disappeared. Everything tastes like lemons—except lemons, which taste like salt. Wine is a waste since Vicodin gives me a thicker more comfortable fog.

She didn't even hear me out. I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 0071140. There was lots of other testimony about her nastiness. She apparently has no family anymore. Her husband is in another prison and still un-paroled after seven tries. No one was there to meet her. Nobody. So why didn't she just accept help instead of whatever check-out counter or cleaning woman job she might be given? Rich parolees don't end up cleaning toilets at Wendy's.

I was only eight years old, still little Lula Ann, when I lifted my arm and pointed my finger at her.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?" The lawyer lady smells of tobacco.

I nod.

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

"Yes."

"Can you show us where she is seated?"

I am afraid of knocking over the paper cup of water the lady lawyer gave me.

"Relax," says the prosecutor lady. "Take your time."

And I did take my time. My hand was in a fist until my arm was straight. Then I unfolded my forefinger. Pow! Like a cap pistol. ^{Mrs. Huxley} She stared at me then opened her mouth as though to say something. ^{Mrs. Huxley} She looked shocked, unbelieving. But my finger still pointed, pointed so long the lady prosecutor had to touch my hand and say, "Thank you, Lula," to get me to put my arm down. I glanced at Dearest; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before—with lips and eyes. And that wasn't all. Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs up. Best of all was Dearest. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that and it

surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't
 like touching me. ~~Not even~~ ^{I was little and} when she bathed me, she had
 a look on her face. After the trial she was my best friend.

I don't know. I think I'm just mad at myself. Why didn't I fight back?
 Why did I just lie there while she beat me? I could have died there if Sofia's
 face hadn't gone apple red with fatigue. Why did I just take it? I didn't
 make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself. She was panting
 when she dragged and pushed me through the door. I can still feel the
 hard fingers clenching the back of my neck, my behind and I can hear the
 crack of my bones hitting concrete. Elbow, ankle, jaw. I feel my arms
 sliding and grabbing for balance. Then my tongue searching through blood
 to locate my teeth. When the door slammed then opened again so she
 could throw out my shoe, like a whipped puppy, I just crawled away. ^{whimpering}

Maybe he is right. I am not the woman. When he left I shook it off
 and pretended 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. I think it's in the trash along with his toothbrush,
 strop and straight razor. It's time to throw all of it out. He left everything:

toiletries, clothes and a cloth bag containing two books, one in a foreign language, the other a book of poems ~~and tiny notebook~~. I pick through the trash and take out his shaving brush and bone-handled razor. I put them both in the medicine cabinet and when I close the door I stare at the ^{my face in} mirror.

"You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time." Jeri, calling himself a 'total person' designer insisted. Looking for a makeover for my new job at Sylvia Inc, I consulted him.

"Not only because of your name," he told me ["] but because of what it does to your licorice skin," he said. "No, you're more Godiva than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate souffle' every time they see you."

That made me laugh. "Or Oreos?"

"Never. Something classy. Bons bons. Hand dipped."

At first it was boring ^{shopping} searching for white only clothes ^g ivory, oyster, ^{pink! I learned how many shades of white there were:} alabaster, paper white ^{moon (love) even} shopping got more interesting when I began choosing colors for accessories.

Snow
cream
ECRU
champagne
Ghost
~~Bone~~

Jeri said

^ "Listen, Bride baby. If you must have a drop of color limit it to shoes and purses, but I'd keep both black when white simply wont do."

I asked him about jewelry. Gold? Some diamonds? An emerald broach?

"No. No." He threw up his hands. "No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No. Not even that. Just you, girl. *A panther in snow.* ~~All sable and snow.~~ And with your body? Please!"

I took his advice and it worked right away. Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the startled even hostile ones I used to get as a child. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry. Plus, unbeknownst to him, Jeri had given me the name for a product line. YOU, Girl.

My face looks almost new in the mirror. My lips are back to normal, so are my nose and my eye. Only my rib area is still tender and, to my surprise, the scraped skin on my face has healed the fastest. I look almost beautiful again, so why am I still sad? On impulse I open the medicine cabinet and take out his shaving brush. I finger it. The silky hair is both tickly and soothing. I bring the brush to my chin, stroke it the way he does. I move it to the underside of my jaw, then up to my earlobes. For some

reason I feel faint. Soap. I need lather. I tear open a fancy box containing a tube of body foam 'for the skin he loves.' Then I squeeze it into the soap dish and wet his brush. Slathering the foam on my face I am breathless. I lather my cheeks, under my nose. This is crazy. I stare at my face. My eyes are so wide and starry. My nose is not only healed it's perfect and my lips between the white foam look so downright kissable I touch them with the tip of my little finger. I don't want to stop, but I have to. I clasp his razor. How did he hold it? Some finger arrangement I don't remember. I'll have to practice. Meantime I use the dull edge and carve dark chocolate avenues through swirls of white lather. I splash water and rinse my face. The satisfaction that follows is strange, is sweet.

This working from home isn't as bad as I thought it would be. I have authority still, although Norma second-guesses me, even overrides a few of my decisions. I don't mind. I'm lucky she has my back. Besides when I feel sad or self-pitying the cure is tucked away in a little kit where his shaving equipment is. Lathering warm soapy water, I can hardly wait for the brush and the razor, the combination that both excites and soothes me. Lets me control and re-imagine times when I was rejected and hurt.

"She's sort of pretty under all that black." Teachers, neighbors
 agreed. Dearest never attended parent-teacher meetings or ^{my volley ball games} school plays. I

was encouraged to take business courses not the college track, community
 college instead of four-year state universities. ^(over) I worked stock, never the ^{working sales where customers could see me} [^]
^{I wanted the} cosmetics counter ^{but didn't dare ask} [^] and got to be a buyer only after rock dumb white girls
[^] got promotions. ^{or screwed up so bad, they settled for somebody who actually knew about stock} Even the interview at Sylvia Inc got off to a bad start. They

questioned my style, my clothes. That's when I consulted Jeri. Afterwards I
 rocketed to Regional Manager. "See?" said Jeri. "Black sells. It's the
 hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls have to strip naked to
 get that kind of attention."

True or not, it made me, re-made me. I began to move differently—
 not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway—but a stride, slow and
 focused. Men leaped and I let myself be caught. For a while, anyway, until
 my sex life became sort of like Diet Coke—sweet minus nutrition. ^{Like} A play
 station game imitating the safe glee of virtual violence and just as brief. All
 my lovers were type cast: would-be actors, rappers, professional athletes,
 players waiting for my crotch or my paycheck like an allowance; others
 already having made it big treating me like a medal, a shiny silent testimony
 to their prowess. Not one of them giving, helpful—all condescending

I didn't do any of that. After I don't know
how many refusals, I finally got a job

about my work. Baby-talking me through what I thought was serious conversation before they found more ego ^{props} enhancement elsewhere.

Then him. Booker. Booker ^{Raybern} Wilson.

I don't want to think about him now. I don't want to remember how handsome he is, ^{perfect} ~~flawless, even~~, except for that ugly burn scar on his shoulder. I ^{have to stop re-living} ~~refuse to think about~~ our lovemaking—how new it felt, both fresh and somehow eternal. He made me want to sing and then, and then out of nowhere, "You are not the woman...." before vanishing like a ghost.

Dismissed.

Erased.

Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me. A ^{convict. A convict.} felon. She could have said, "No thanks," or even "Get out!" No. She went postal. ^{Maybe} I suppose fighting is prison talk. Instead of words, broken bones and drawing blood is ^{their} conversation. I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave.

We had lunch in my office the day before he split—lobster salad, Smart water, peach slices in brandy. Oh, stop. I can't keep thinking about

him. And I'm stir-crazy slouching around these rooms. Too much light, too much space, too lonely. I have to put on some clothes and get out of here. Do what Norma keeps nagging me about: forget sunglasses and floppy hats, show myself, live life, ~~like it is life~~. She should know; she's making Sylvia Inc her own.

I choose carefully: ^{bone}white shorts and halter, high wedged rope and straw sandals, beige canvas tote where I drop in the shaving brush in case I need it. Elle magazine and sunglasses too. Norma would approve even though I'm just going two blocks to a park mostly for dog walkers and seniors this time of day. Later on there will be joggers and skaters, but no mothers and children on a Saturday. Their weekends are for play dates, play rooms, playgrounds and play restaurants all guarded by nannies with limited vocabularies.

I choose a bench near an artificial pond where real ducks sail. And while I quickly block a memory of his describing the ~~real~~ difference between wild drakes and yard birds, my muscles remember cool messaging fingers. While I flip pages and scan pictures of the young and seductive I hear slow steps on gravel. I look up. The steps belong to a gray-haired

couple strolling by, silent holding hands. Their paunches are the exact same size, although his is lower down. Both wear colorless slacks and loose t-shirts imprinted with faded signs, front and back, about peace. The teenage dog walkers snigger and yank leashes for no reason, except perhaps envy of a long life of intimacy. The couple moves languidly as though in a dream. Steps matching, looking straight ahead like people called to a spaceship where a door slides open and a tongue of red carpet rolls out. They will ascend, hand in hand, into the arms of a benevolent Presence. They will hear music so beautiful it will bring you to tears.

That does it. The hand holding couple, their silent music. I can't stop it now—I'm back in the packed ^{stadium.} ~~concert hall~~. The screaming audience is no match for the wild, sexy music. Crowds dance in the aisles; people stand on their ^{bench} ~~seats~~ and clap to the drums. My arms are in the air waving to the music. My hips and head sway on their own. Before I see his face, his arms are around my waist, my back to his chest, his chin in my hair. Then his hands ^{are} on my stomach and me dropping mine to hold his while we dance back to front. When the music stops I turn around to look at him. He smiles. I am wet and shivering.

Before I leave the park, I ~~know~~^{finger}
 The bristles of the shaving brush^{are} soft and warm. ^{They are}

Norma picks the restaurant. Pirate, it's called, a semi-chic, formerly hot, now barely hanging on place for tourists and the definitely un-cool. The evening is too chilly for the sleeveless white shift I'm wearing, but I want to impress Norma with my progress, my barely visible scars. She is dragging me out of what she says is classic post-rape depression. Her suggested cure is this over-designed watering hole where male waiters in red suspenders emphasizing their bare chests will do the trick. She is a good friend. No pressure, she says. Just a quiet dinner in a mostly empty restaurant with cute but harmless beef on display.

We talk office gossip through the appetizer but the giggling stops with the mahi mahi. I ^{scrape} nudge the ^{sesame seeds from the filet} pine nuts away and blurt out, "I want a vacation, to go somewhere. On a cruise ship."

Norma grins, "Oooh. Where? Finally, some good news."

"But no kids," I say.

"That's easy. Fiji, maybe?"

"And no parties. I want to be with settled people with paunches.
And play shuffleboard on a deck. Bingo, too."

"Bride, you're scaring me."

I put down my fork. "No, really. Just quiet. Nothing louder than
waves lapping or ice melting in crystal glasses."

Norma puts her elbow on the table and covers my hand with her
own. "Aw, girl, you're still in shock. I'm not going to let you make any plans
until this rape stuff wears off. You won't know what you want until then.
Trust me, alright?"

I'm tired of this. Next she'll be insisting I see a rape therapist or
attend victim fests. I'm really sick of it because I need to be able to have an
honest conversation with my closest friend. I cross my knife and fork. *bite the tip of asparagus then slowly*

"Look, I lied to you." I push my plate so hard it knocks over what's left
of my martini. I mop it up with my napkin carefully, *slowly*, trying to steady
myself and make what I say sound normal. "I lied, girlfriend. I lied to you. *No body tried to rape me*
and That was a woman beat the hell out of me. Somebody I was trying to help,

for Christ's sake. I tried to help her and she would have killed me if she could."

Norma stares. "A woman? What 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 full plate, please."

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

"I can't hear this," says Norma, but her eyes are wide with questions.

"You asked for the full plate."

"Okay, okay."

"Well, she was caught, tried, and sent away."

"Got it. So what's the problem?"

"I testified against her."

"Even better. So?"

"I pointed. I sat in the witness chair and pointed her out. Said I saw her do it."

"And?"

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

"Good. End of story, no?"

"No." I am fidgeting, adjusting my neckline as well as my face. "I thought about her on and off, you know?"

"Uh, uh. Tell me."

"Well, she was just twenty."

"So were the Manson girls."

"Now she's close to forty and I thought she probably has no friends."

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

"You're not hearing me."

"Damn straight I'm not listening to you." Norma slaps the table.

"You nuts? Who is this female alligator, besides being pond scum, I mean.

Is she related to you? What?"

"No."

"Well?"

"I just thought she would be sad, lonely after all these years."

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

This is going nowhere. How can I expect her to understand? I signal the waiter. "Again," I say and nod toward my empty glass.

The waiter lifts his eyebrows and looks at Norma. "None for me Cookie. I need cold sobriety."

He gives her a killer smile full of bright and bonded teeth.

"Look, Norma, I don't know why I went. What I do know is I kept thinking about her. All these years in Decagon."

"You write to her? Visit?"

"No. I've seen her only twice. Once at the trial and then when this happened." I point to my face.

You lunatic!

"~~Moron!~~" Norma seems really disgusted. "You put her behind bars!

Of course she wants to put your lights out."

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

"Before? Before what? You said you saw her twice—at the trial and when she clocked you. But what about seeing her diddling kids? You said..."

The waiter leans in with my drink. "Okay." I'm getting irritable.

"Three times."

Norma touches the corner of her mouth. "Say, Bride, did she molest you too? You can tell me."

Jesus. What does she think? That I'm a secret lesbian? In a company practically run by bi's, straights, trannies, gays and anybody who took their looks seriously. There are no more closets.

"Norma, don't be stupid." I shot her the look Dearest used to put on when I spilled the Kool Ade or tripped on the rug.

"Okay, okay." She waves her hand. "Waiter, honey, I've changed my mind. Bluveldt. Rocks. Double it."

The waiter winks. "You got it," he says hitting 'got' with a slur that must have earned him a promising cell phone number in ^{South Dakota,} Missouri.

Norma is frowning.

"Look, girlfriend. Think about it. What made you feel so sorry for her? I mean, really."

"I don't know." I shake my head. "I guess I wanted to feel good about myself. Not so disposable. Sofia Huxley, that's her name, was all I could think of, someone who would appreciate some...something friendly without strings."

"I get it."

"Do you? Really?"

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

Sorta. I guess.

"Right."

"So we fix it."

"How?" If anybody knows what to do, it's Norma. Hitting the floor, she always says, requires a choice—lie there or bounce. "How do we fix it?"

"Well, not with no bingo." She is laughing.

"What then?"

"Blingo!" she shouts.

"You called?" asks the waiter.

Two weeks later, true to her word, Norma organizes a celebration—a pre-launch party where I am the main attraction, the one who invented YOU, Girl and helped create excitement about its brand. The location is a fancy hotel, I think. No, a smarty pants museum. A crowd is waiting and so is a limousine. My hair, dress and makeup are perfect: diamond like jewels spangle the white lace of my gown, which is tight fitting above the mermaid-like flounce at my ankles. It's transparent in interesting places but veiled in others--nipples and the ~~hairless~~ triangle below my navel.

All that's left is to choose earrings. One carat diamonds. Modest, nothing flashy, nothing to detract from what Jeri calls my chocolate and whipped cream palette.

Christ. Now what? They won't go in. The platinum stem keeps slipping away from my earlobe. I examine the earrings, nothing wrong. I peer at my lobes closely and discover they are not pierced. Ridiculous. I've had pierced ears since I was eight years old. Dearest gave me little dots of fake gold as a present after I testified against the Monster. Since then I've never worn clip ons. Never. Pearl dots, usually, ignoring 'total person' designer and sometimes, like now, diamonds. ^{my} This is impossible. After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb? Maybe the plastic surgery, side effects of the antibiotics? But that was months ago. I am trembling. I need the shaving brush but I can't spoil my make up. The phone is ringing. I get the brush out and stroke it lightly at my cleavage. It makes me dizzy. The phone keeps ringing. Okay, no jewelry, no earrings. I pick up the phone.

"Miss Bride, your driver is here."

If I pretend sleep maybe he will just get the hell out. Whoever he is I can't face him to chat or fake after-sex ^{cuddle} pleasure, especially since I don't remember any of it. He kisses my shoulder lightly then fingers my hair. I murmur as though dreaming, smile but keep my eyes closed. He moves the bedclothes and goes into the bathroom. I sneak a touch to my ear lobes. Smooth. Too smooth. I am complimented constantly at the party—how beautiful, how pretty, so hot, so lovely everyone says but no one questions the absence of earrings. I find that strange, because all through the speeches, the award presentation, the dinner, the dancing, my baby thumb ear lobes are so much on my mind I can't concentrate. So I deliver an incoherent thank you speech, laugh too long at stupid jokes, stumble through conversations with co-workers, drink twice, three times more than what I can gracefully hold. I flirt like a high school brat running for prom queen, which is how I let whoever he is in my bed. I taste my tongue hoping the film is mine alone. God. Thank you. No handcuffs dangle from the bedposts.

He has finished showering and calls my name while putting his tuxedo back on. I don't answer; I don't look; I just pull the pillow over my head. That amuses him and I hear him chuckle. I listen to kitchen noises as

he makes coffee. No, not coffee; I would smell it. He is pouring something—orange juice, V 8, flat champagne? That's all that's in the refrigerator. Silence, then footsteps. Please, please just leave. I hear a tick on the nightstand followed by the sound of my front door opening then closing. When I peep from under the pillow I see a folded square of paper next to the clock. Telephone number. "Fabulous." Then his name. I slump with relief. He is not an employee.

I rush to the bathroom and look in the wastebasket. Thank you, Jesus. A used condom. Traces of steam are on the shower glass near the medicine cabinet whose mirror is clear, sparkling showing me what I saw last night—ear lobes as chaste as the day I was born. So, this is what crazy is. Not goofy behavior, but watching a sudden change in the world you used to know. I need the shaving brush, the soap. There is not a single hair in my armpit, but I lather it anyway. Now the other one. The lathering up, the shaving calms me and I am so grateful I begin to think of other places that might need this little delight. My pudenda, perhaps. Will it be too tricky using the straight razor down there? Tricky. Yes.

return to my bed and
 Calmed I slide under the sheet. Minutes later my head explodes with throbbing pain. I get up and find two Vicodans to swallow. Waiting for the pills to work there is nothing to do but let my thoughts trail, track and bite one another.

what is happening to me?

My life is falling down. I'm sleeping with men whose names I don't know and not remembering any of it. What's ^{going on} happening? I'm young; I'm happy. Why am I so miserable? I have what I've worked for and am good at it. I'm proud of myself. Well, I remember some not-so-proud junk in the past, but I've gotten over it and moved on. Even Booker thought so, didn't he? I spilled my guts to him, told him everything: every fear, every insult, every accomplishment however small. While talking to him certain things I had forgotten came up fresh as though I was seeing them for the first time—how Dearest's bedroom always seemed unlit, her grown up woman stuff crowding her vanity: tweezers, cotton balls, that round box of Lucky Lady face powder, the blue bottle of Midnight in Paris cologne, hairpins in a tiny saucer, tissue, eyebrow pencils, mascara, nail polish. No wonder I'm in the cosmetics business. It must have been describing all that stuff on Dearest's dresser that made me tell him about that other thing. All about it. Me hearing a cat's meow through the open window next to the dresser, how

pained it sounded, frightened, even. I looked. Down below in the walled area that led to the building's basement I saw not a cat but a man. He was leaning over the short, fat legs of a child between his white hairy thighs. The boy's little hands were fists, opening and closing. The man's trousers were down around his ankles. I leaned over the windowsill and stared. The man had the same red hair as Mr. Leigh, the landlord, but I knew it couldn't be him because he was stern but not dirty. He demanded the rent be paid in cash before noon on the first day of the month and charged a late fee if you knocked on his door five minutes late. Dearest was so scared of him, she made sure I delivered the money first thing in the morning. I know now what I didn't know then—that standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment. And that it would be hard finding a location in another safe, meaning mixed, neighborhood. So when I told Dearest what I'd seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment. She said, "Don't you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word." So I was afraid to tell her the rest—that although I didn't make a sound, I just hung over the window sill and looked, something made the

man look up. And it was Mr. Leigh. He was zipping his pants while the boy lay whimpering between his boots. The look on his face scared me but I couldn't move. That's when I heard him shout. "Hey, little nigger! Close that window and get the fuck outta there!"

When I told Booker about it I laughed at first pretending the whole thing was just silly. Then I felt my eyes burning. Even before the tears welled, he held my head in the crook of his arm and pressed his chin in my hair.

"You never told anybody?" he asked me.

"Never," I said. "Only you."

"Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand."

He turned my face up to his and kissed me. "Did you ever see that boy again?"

I said I didn't think so, that he was down on the ground and I couldn't see his face. "All I know is that he was a white kid with

brown hair." Then thinking of how his little fingers spread then curled, spread wide then curled tight I couldn't help sobbing.

"Bride, you're not responsible for other folks' evil."

"I know, but—"

"No buts."

~~"But nothing."~~ Correct what you can; learn from what you can't."

"I don't always know what's correct."

"Yes you do. Think. No matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity."

That was one of the best talks we ever had. I felt such relief. No. More than that. I felt curried, safe, owned.

Not like now, twisting and turning between the most expensive cotton sheets in the world. Aching, fretting in my gorgeous bedroom unable to stop scary thoughts. Truth. What if it was the landlord my finger was really pointing at in that courtroom? What that teacher was accused of was like what Mr. Leigh did. Was I pointing at the idea of him? His nastiness or the curse he threw at

me? I was six years old and had never heard the word before, but its hate and disgust didn't need definition. Just like later in school when other curses—with mysterious definitions but clear purposes—were hissed or shouted at me. Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides imitating zoo monkeys. One day a girl and three boys heaped ^{a bunch of} bananas on my desk and did their monkey imitations. They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper. I didn't complain to the teacher for the same reason Dearest cautioned me about Mr. Leigh—I might get suspended or even expelled. So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no anti-biotic available. Which, actually, was a good thing now I think of it because I built up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn't need silicone for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a death-like pallor. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It's glory.

Today is Saturday and I've been in and out of bed for two days. I've stopped worrying about the change in my ear lobes; I can always get them pierced again. Norma telephones and keeps me up to date on office matters. I asked for and got an extension on my leave. She is 'acting' Regional Manager now. Good for her. She deserves it just for getting me out of that Decagon horror, taking care of me for days, seeing to the return of my Jaguar, hiring a cleaning crew, choosing the plastic surgeon. She even fired Rose, my maid, for me when I could no longer stand the sight of her—fat, with cantaloupe breasts and watermelon behind. I couldn't have healed without her. Still, her calls are fewer and fewer.

NORMA

I thought he was a pervert. I don't care what a dancing crowd is doing you just don't grab somebody from behind like that unless you know them. But she didn't mind at all. She let him squeeze her, rub up against her and she didn't know a thing about him, still

doesn't. But I do. I saw him with a bunch of raggedy losers ^{at} in the subway ^{entrance} tunnel. Panhandling, for Christ's sake. And once I'm pretty sure I saw him sprawled on the steps of the library, pretending he was reading a book so the cops wouldn't make him move on. Bride never mentioned what he did, what, if any, job he had. Said she liked the mystery. Liar. She liked the sex. Addicted to it and believe me I know. When the three of us were together she was different somehow. Confident, not so needy and constantly, obviously soliciting praise. In his company she shimmered, but quietly kind of. I don't know. Yes he was one good-looking man. So what? What else did he offer besides a rut between sheets? He didn't have a dime to his name.

I could have warned her. I'm not a bit surprised he left her like a skunk leaves a smell. If she knew what I knew she would have thrown him out. Just for fun I flirted with him, tried to seduce him. In her own bedroom. I was bringing something to Bride, mock-ups of packaging. I have her key and just opened the door. When I called her name, he answered saying "Bride's not here." I went into her bedroom--there he was lying in her bed reading. Naked too. On

impulse, and it really was impulse, I kicked off my shoes and the rest of my clothes followed. He looked at me but didn't say a word so I know he wanted me to stay. I joined him; slipped between the sheets; put my arm around his chest and planted light kisses there. He put his book away.

I said, "Don't you want another flower in your garden?"

He said, "Are you sure you know what makes a garden grow?"

"I sure do," I said. "Tenderness."

"And dung," he answered.

I elbowed myself up and stared at him. He wasn't smiling but he wasn't pushing me away either. If I'd wanted to I could have made him make love to me. I really could have.

Bride doesn't know a thing about her used-to-be lover. But I do.

BRIDE

I don't get it. Who the hell is he? His cloth bag, which I am about to toss, is stuffed with books, one in German, two books of poetry by somebody named Hass; some paperback novels by other people I've never heard of.

Christ. I thought I knew him. I know he has degrees from a university. He owns t-shirts that say so, but I never thought about that part of his life because what was important in our relationship, other than our lovemaking and his understanding of me, was the fun we had. In the clubs, other couples watching us with envy. Now I find these books that show me that he was somebody else, somebody thinking things he never talked about. True, our conversations were mostly about me but they were not the joke-filled sarcastic ones I usually had with other men. Anything ^{besides} other ~~than~~ my flirting or their pronouncements, would lead to disagreements, arguments, break-ups. I could never have described my childhood to them as I did to Booker. Well, there were times when he talked at length, but none of it was intimate—it was more like a lecture. Once when we were at

the shore ^{hanging out} resting in beach chairs, he started talking to me about the history of water in California. A bit boring, yes, ^{and} but I was ^{sort of} mildly interested. Still, I fell asleep.

I have no idea what occupied him when I was at the office and I ^{asked} never inquired. I thought he liked ^{ME more because} the fact that I never ^{probed or} nagged him, that I left him his private life. ^(over) After I lavished everything in my heart on him, he told me nothing about himself. I talked; he listened. Then he ran, split, left without a word. Mocking me, dumping me exactly as Sofia Huxley did. Neither of us had mentioned marriage, but I really thought I had found my guy. "You are not the woman" is the last thing I expected to hear.

Days, weeks of mail are piled in the basket by my door. After searching the refrigerator for something to nibble on, I decide to examine the pile—toss out the pleas for money from every charity in the world, the promises of gifts from banks, stores and failing businesses. ^{Just} Two first class letters remain. One is from Dearest. "Hi, Honey." More stuff before the usual hint for money. The other is addressed to Booker ^{Rayburn} ~~tk~~ from Sally's on tk street. I tear it open and find a reminder invoice. Sixty-eight dollars

Salvatore Ponti

I thought it showed how much I
trusted him - that it ^{was} him I ^{was attracted to} ~~loved~~ not
what work he did. Every girl I know
introduces her boyfriend as ~~so and so~~
~~a~~ a lawyer or artist or club owner.
The job not the person was what
she adored.

I shouldn't have - trusted him, I mean.

overdue. I don't know whether to trash the invoice or go see what Sally did for sixty-eight dollars. Before I can make up my mind, the telephone rings.

"Hey, how was it? Last night. Fab, huh? You were a knockout as usual." Norma is slurping something between words. A nutritious, calorie-free, energy-filled, diet supporting, fake-flavored, creamy, dye-colored something. "WASN'T the after party great?"

"Yeah," I answer.

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

I go to my bedside table and look again at the note. "Phil something."

"How was he?"

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

"What? Now?"

"Didn't we talk about a cruise somewhere?" My voice is whiney, I know.

"We did, sure, but after YOU, Girl starts shipping. The sample gift bags are in and the ad ^{guys have} department has several mock-ups—"

She rattles on until I stop her. "Look, I'll call you later. I'm a bit hung over."

"No kidding," Norma giggles.

When I hang up I've already decided to check out ^{MR Pontti,} ~~Sally's.~~

SOFIA

I am not allowed to be near children. Home care was my first job when I was paroled. It suited me because the lady was nice. Grateful, even, for my help. And I liked being away from crowds. After one month, though, I

had to leave because my patient's grandchildren visited her on weekends.

My parole officer found me something similar ^{but without} ~~minus~~ children—a nursing home that didn't call itself a hospice but that is what it mostly was.

Children? Hardly. At first I didn't like being around so many people especially ones I had to answer to. But I got used to it since my superiors were not menacing me even though they wore uniforms. Anything that looked or felt like prison gave me a bad attitude. I barely survived those fifteen years. Had it not been for weekend basket ball games and my only friend and cellmate, I doubt I would have made it. We two were at the bottom of the heap of murderers, arsonists, drug dealers, bomb-throwing revolutionaries and the mentally ill. Threatening children was their idea of the lowest of the low—which is a hoot since the drug dealers could care less about their poison or how old they were and the arsonists didn't ^{separate} ~~warn~~ the families ^{from the} ~~with~~ children they burned.

My cellmate, Julie, was serving time for smothering her disabled daughter. We worked in the sewing shop making uniforms for a ~~tk~~ ^J company that paid us twelve cents an hour. When my fingers got stiff I was moved to the kitchen where I dropped the food I didn't scorch and was sent back to the sewing machines. But Julie wasn't there. She was in the infirmary after

trying to hang herself. She didn't know how. A few inmates offered to show her. When she returned to population she was different—quiet and not much company.

I read a lot. That was one good thing about Decagon—their library.

The very day I was paroled one of the kids who testified against me—all grown up now—visited me. I didn't know who she was at first although something about her eyes seemed familiar. She threw money at me as though that would erase fifteen years of confinement. I blanked. My fists took over and when I got rid of her I curled up into a ball on the bed and waited for the police. Waited and waited. None came. If they had opened the door they would have seen a woman finally broken down after fifteen years of staying strong. For the first time after all those years I cried. Cried and cried until I fell asleep.

Now I think of it, the girl did do me a favor. Not the stupid one she planned, but the release of unshed tears. When I woke up I was clean and able.

it was clear that the word "Palace" was less a joke than an insanity. Under ~~dusty~~ glass counters row after row of jewelry and watches preened. A man, good looking the way elderly men can be, moved toward her. His jeweler's eyes swept all he could take in of his customer.

CHAPTER TWO

A taxi was preferable because parking a Jaguar in that neighborhood was as foolish as it was risky. That Booker frequented this part of the city startled Bride. Why here? *she wondered.* There were music stores in unthreatening neighborhoods, places where tattooed men and women dressed like ghouls weren't huddled on corners or squatting on curbs. Once the taxi stopped at the address she'd given him, and after he told her he wouldn't wait Bride stepped quickly toward the door of Salvatore Ponti's Pawn Palace. Inside

it was clear that the word "Palace" was less a joke than an insanity. Under ^{cloudy} ~~dusty~~ glass counters row after row of jewelry and watches preened. A man, good looking the way elderly men can be, moved toward her. His jeweler's eyes swept all he could take in of his customer.

"Mr. Ponti?"

"Call me Sally, sweetheart. What can I do you for?"

Bride waved the overdue notice and explained she'd come to settle the bill and pick up whatever had been repaired. Sally examined the notice. "Oh, yeah," he said. "Thumb ring. It's in back. Come on."

Together they went into a back room where guitars hung on the walls and all sorts of metal pieces covered the cloth of a table. The man working there looked up from his magnifier to glance at Bride and then the notice. He went to a cupboard and removed a trumpet wrapped in

purple cloth. "He didn't mention the pinkie ring," said the repair man, "but I fixed it anyway. Picky guy, real picky."

Bride took the horn wondering why Booker had it then handed Sally the amount owed.

"Nice, though and smart for a country boy," said the repairman.

"Country?" Bride frowned. "He lives here."

"Oh, yeah? Told me he was from some hick town up north," said Sally.

"Whiskey," said the repairman.

"What are you talking about?" asked Bride.

"Funny, right? Who could forget a town called Whiskey? Nobody, that's who."

The men laughed and started calling out other
ridiculous names of towns. (over)

The sun and the moon shared the horizon like a
distant friendship, each unfazed by the other. Bride
didn't notice the light, how carnival it made the sky. She
was preoccupied with the Jaguar's radio. Nina Simone
was too aggressive making Bride think of something other
than herself. She switched to soft jazz, more suitable for
the leather surroundings and a soothing background for
the anxiety she needed to repress. She had never done
anything this reckless—driving into unknown territory to
confront not just him but most importantly herself. ^{to prove something to}
^
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 freedom and

Look here. He gave us another
address. Somebody named Olive. Q.
Olive. Whiskey, California

most of all 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 a sudden, unexplained break-up. The first produced tears; the second a flip "Yeah so?"

Too scared to defy Dearest or the landlord or Sofia Huxley, there was one other person available to confront.

The one she had bared her soul to while he was mocking

her. It would take courage though, something she had

~~avoided all of her life.~~

mistook for success in business
that being successful she thought she had plenty of.

According to the men at Sally's he was from a place called Whiskey. Maybe he had gone back there. He ~~might~~ be

living with another woman he didn't want or he might

have moved on. Whatever the case 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 here woman? This one driving a Jaguar in an oyster white cashmere dress and boots of brushed rabbit fur 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 for example. In addition to breasts every woman (his kind or not) wanted longer, thicker eyelashes. ^(over) ^

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 a single 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 she chose

A girl
You could be snake thin ^{and starving} but if ^{she} ~~you~~
had boobs and ~~large~~ racoon eyes
She was happy.

was spotless ^{and empty} in spite of the smell of beer and tobacco.

was not recent nor was the

~~Over the counter~~ ^{that} a framed confederate flag nestled the official American one.

"Ma'am?" The counter waitress's eyes were wide and roving. Bride was used to that look, ^{as well as} but not the open mouth that accompanied it. It reminded her of the reception she got on the first days of school. Shock, as though she had three eyes.

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

"White? You mean no eggs?"

"No. No yolks."

Bride ate as much as she could of that ^{red neck} ~~trailer-park~~ version of eatable food then asked where the bathroom was. She left ^{a five bill} ~~three dollars~~ on the counter in case the waitress thought she was skipping. Standing at the mirror over the sink, she noticed the neckline of her

cashmere dress was askew, slanting down so much her left shoulder was bare. 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 instead of a size 2 she had purchased a size 4 and just now noticed the difference. But the dress fit her perfectly when she started this trip. Perhaps, she thought, there was 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. A tiny remembrance of altered ear lobes was quickly erased.

collecting the change and deciding on the tip
While settling the bill plus tip, Bride asked
directions to Whiskey.

^{Ain't}
 "Not all that far," said the staring waitress. "A hundred miles maybe one fifty. You'll make it before dark."

Is that what backwoods trash called 'not far' wondered Bride. She gassed up, had the tires checked and followed the turn out onto the highway. ^{Contrary to the waitress's certainty} It was ^{very} 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. Perhaps that was the reason she trusted the high beam headlights and accelerated. The automobile overshot a bend and crashed into what might have been the world's first and biggest ^{beech tree} sycamore circled by bushes hiding its lower trunk. Bride fought the air bag, moving so frightened and fast she did not notice her foot caught and twisted in the space between the brake pedal and the

buckled door until trying to free it stunned her with pain. Nothing helped. She lay there awkwardly on the driver's seat ^{trying} ~~determined~~ to ease her left foot out of the elegant rabbit furred boot. Stretching and twisting she managed to get her cell phone, but its face was blank except for the 'no service' message. The likelihood of a passing car was ^{but possible} dim ~~in the dark~~ so she ~~simply~~ pressed the car's horn desperate for the honk to do more than frighten owls. It frightened nothing because it made no sound. There was nothing left to do but lie there the rest of the night by turns afraid, furious, ^{in pain} exhausted, weepy. ^(over) ~~Mostly~~ Mostly she felt world-hurt—an awareness of malign forces changing her ^{courageous} from a ~~would-be~~ adventurer into a fugitive.

The sun merely hinted at its rise, teasing the sky with a promise of revealing its whole self instead of an apricot slice. Bride, ^{exhausted by} ~~tearful~~ with body cramp and leg pain felt a tingle of hope. A helmet-less motor cyclist, a truck

free limb
that had
fallen
on

Even the ^{dazzling} carpet of stars seen through the
The wind should plagued her.

full of loggers, a serial rapist, a boy on a bike, a bear hunter—was there no one to lend a hand? While imagining who or what might rescue her, a small bone white face appeared at the passenger's side window. A girl, very young carrying a ^{Kitten} ~~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 in the dark, the ^{beech} ~~sycamore~~ and surrounding 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 appeared. He ^{squinted} ~~peered~~ into the window ^{then} and went around to the driver's door. ^{over} When he pried ^{the door} then yanked it open ^{her} *Bride's* scream startled them both. Carefully he eased her foot from under the brake pedal ^{and} away from 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 so black?"

"For the same reason yours is so white."

"Oh. You mean like my kittens?"

"Right. Born that way."

After removing the branch from
the hood

Bride sucked her teeth. What an easy conversation between mother and daughter. She is faking sleep, eavesdropping under a 'Navajo' blanket, her ankle propped on a pillow throbbing in its furry boot. 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 sure, he said, but there was a chance it wasn't too early for the only doctor in the area to be found. He didn't think it was just a sprain, the man said. The ankle might be broken. Without phone service, including Bride's cell phone, he had no choice but to get in his truck and drive into ^{the village} ~~town~~ 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. ^{teen age-y} That is until

Evelyn motioned to the emerald-eyed girl. "Bride, meet Raisin. 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.

"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 tucked the blanket under her guest and did not trouble to whisper the black or white kittens 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

*Careful and
mindful of
the propped
up leg*

something made in the forties or fifties when film stars had distinguishing faces unlike now when hairstyles alone separated one star from another. But she could not put a name to the memory—actress or film. Little Raisin, on the other hand, resembled no one Bride had ever seen—^{ghost}~~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}~~home~~ seemed to be a converted studio or machine shop: one large space containing table, chairs, sink, wood burning cook stove and the scratchy ^{Against a wall} stood a wooden loom with ^{mounds of yarn - near it.} Above was a skylight that needed a good power cleaning. All over the room light, unaided by electricity, moved like water—a shadow here could be gone in an instant, a shaft hitting a copper pot might take minutes to dissolve. An open door to the rear revealed a 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.

Bride quickly dashed a bright memory of Dearest humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann looking on. Eventually she did fall asleep only to be awakened ^{AROUND NOON} by Steve accompanied by a very old, rumped doctor.

"This ^{is} Walt," said Steve.

"Dr. Muskie," said the doctor, "Walter Muskie, M D., Ph D., LLD, DDT, OMB"

Steve laughed, "He's joking."

Bride sucked air through clenched teeth as the doctor sliced through her beautiful white boot. Expertly and without pity he examined her ankle and announced it

^{fractured}
~~broken~~ and unfixable here in Steve's house—she need^{ed} to
 go to the clinic for an x ray, cast and so on. All he could

do, or would do, is clean and bind it so it wouldn't swell ^{or} ^{more now} ^{that her}
^{He said they should go to his clinic rightaway,}
~~worsen.~~ ^{boot was off,}

Bride refused ~~to go~~. She was suddenly so hungry it
 made her angry. She wanted to bathe and then eat before
 being driven to another tacky country clinic. Meantime
 she asked for painkillers.

^{Besides we don't have all day}
 "No," said Steve. "First things first."

Steve 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
 street from a post office situated in a charming sea blue
 clapboard house, which 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 her plastic surgeon's.

Dr. Muskie smiled at her astonishment. "Loggers are like soldiers," he said, "they have the worst wounds and need the best and quickest care."

^{TK}
^{An hour} ~~Thirty minutes~~ later she was ^{back} in the truck sitting next to a silent Steve with her left leg sticking as straight under the dashboard as possible. Back in the house Bride's earlier hunger dissipated as the awareness of being unwashed overtook it.

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

Slop jar, outhouse toilet, metal washtub, Bride started to cry and they let her while they ate ^{dinner} ~~supper~~.

Later, trying to overcome embarrassment, 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 more than embarrassed, she was 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 themselves out for her without hesitation asking nothing in return. Who are these people, she wondered, and where did they come from?

In the following ^{weeks} ~~days~~ waiting for her ankle to heal and the Jaguar to be repaired Bride learned that her hosts were in their fifties. Steve had graduated from Reed College, Evelyn from Ohio State. With constant bursts of laughter they described how they met. First in India (Bride saw the light of pleasant memories shining

Later trying to overcome embarrassment, she
threw herself to accept the place. Evelyn felt better.

But her gratitude and embarrassment
were short lived. They were treating her like
a stray cat, or a dog with a broken leg. They
felt sorry for.

minute, belated, childish and unwilling to help herself
attempts to get away from others. She was
people living the best life putting themselves out for
her without hesitation asking nothing in return. Who are
these people who want to help and where did they come
from?
In the following days waiting for her ankle to heal
and the jaguar to be repaired. Evelyn had graduated from
hostels were in their illness. She had graduated from
Reed College, Evelyn from Ohio State. With
bursts of laughter they described how they had
India (Birdie 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 that way (Steve touched Evelyn's cheek) so they got married in Tia Juana and "moved to California to live a real life."

Bride's envy watching ^{them} ~~that~~ was infantile but she couldn't stop herself. "By 'real' you mean poor?" She 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?"

Bride blinked but said nothing.

She stayed with them for twelve ^{weeks} days sleeping in a house of such deep darkness at night it was suffocating.

Outside the sky would be loaded with more stars than she had ever seen in the city. But in here under a filthy skylight and no electricity she had trouble sleeping. ^ (over)

^{Finally} When Dr. Muskie ^{replaced} returned to remove her cast and ^{he added a foot brace so she could limp a little.} ^{she glimpsed} expose the disgusting skin underneath. ^ Evelyn was true to her word. She poured pail after pail of hot water into a

zinc tub, handed Bride a sponge and a bar of hard-to-lather brown soap. Bride sank into the water with 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

One morning she woke to find
Rain standing next to the couch she
slept on.

"What do you want?" she asked

Rain didn't answer.

"You shouldn't stare at people."

Rain turned away. A few minutes
later Bride saw her sitting next to the
loom, still staring.

"Please stop that," said Bride

"But you're ^{so} pretty" said Rain. "Real
pretty."

flat with only the nipples to prove it was not her back. Her shock was so great she plopped back down into the dirty water holding the towel over her chest like a shield. I must be sick, dying, she thought. She wound the towel above the place where her breasts once announced themselves and rose to the lips of moaning lovers. Fighting panic she called out to Evelyn.

"Please, do you have something I can wear?"

"Sure," said Evelyn, and after a few minutes brought Bride a T shirt and a pair of her own jeans. The pants were so large she exchanged them for a pair of Raisin's, which fit Bride perfectly.

She meant to lie down just for a minute, collect her thoughts, but without any drowsiness or warning she fell asleep. There out of that dark silence sprang a vivid fully felt dream. His hand was moving between her thighs

and when her arms flew up and closed over his back he exchanged his fingers, replaced them with ^{what they called} the pride and wealth of nations. She started to whisper or moan but his lips were pressing hers. She woke up humming. Yet when she touched the place where her breasts used to be the humming changed to sobs. That's when she understood that the body changes began ^{not simply} after he left. ^{Perhaps} ~~Maybe even~~ because he left.

Stay still, she thought; her brain was wobbly but she would straighten it, go about as if everything was normal. No one must know and no one must see. Her conversation and activity must be routine. Like an after bath washing of hair. Limping to the kitchen sink she poured water from the standing pitcher, soaped then rinsed her hair. As she looked around for a towel Evelyn came in.

Ooh
"Hey, Bride," she said, smiling. "You got too much hair for a dish towel. Come on, let's sit outside and we can dry it in sunlight and fresh air."

(over) She
"Sure," said Bride. And followed Evelyn to a rusty iron bench sitting in the yard bathed in a bright platinum light. Next to it was a side table where a bottle of unlabeled whiskey sat. Toweling Bride's hair, Evelyn chatted away in typical beauty-parlor mode. How happy living here under stars with a perfect man made her, how much she had learned traveling, housekeeping without modern amenities, which she called trash-ready junk since none of it lasted, and how Rain improved their lives.

When Bride asked her when and where Rain came from, Evelyn sat down and poured whiskey into a cup.

"It took a while to get the whole story," she said.

Bride listened intently. Anything. Anything to stop

Acting Normal was good, she thought. It might even
restore the body changes - or halt them,

thinking first about how her body was changing and second how to make sure no one noticed. When Evelyn handed her the T shirt as she stepped out of the tub Evelyn didn't say a word. Bride had spectacular breasts when rescued from the Jaguar; she had them in Whiskey Clinic. Now they were gone, like a botched mastectomy that left nipples intact. She was so shocked it took a while to discover her pubic hair was gone as well. Nothing hurt; her organs worked as usual except for a strangely delayed menstrual period. So what kind of illness was she suffering? One that was both visible and invisible. Him, she believed. His curse.

"Sure you don't want some?" Evelyn raised her cup before answering Bride's question about ^{Rain}~~Raisin~~.

"Thanks, no. Tell me what did you mean by finding her in the rain?"

*were driving
home from a
antiwar protest
and*

"We did. Steve and I [^]saw this little girl, sopping wet on a brick doorstep and stopped our van. Both of us thought she was lost or her door key was."

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. Not a word. She turned her head away when Steve squatted down in front of her and when he touched her shoulder she jumped up and ran off. So he just got back in the van ^{to} ~~and we~~ continued ~~on~~ home. Then the rain started really coming down--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, more for shelter than coffee."

"So you lost her?"

"Then, yes." Evelyn replenished her cup and sipped from it.

"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 ^{in the alley} behind the building."

"Jesus," said Bride, shuddering as though it was herself in that alley.

"It was Steve who decided not to leave her there. I wasn't so sure it was any of our business but he just went over and grabbed her, threw her over his shoulder. She was screaming—kidnap! Kidnap! but not too loud. I don't think she wanted attention, especially from pigs, I mean cops. We put her in the back seat and locked the doors."

"Was she quiet then?"

she kept saying 'let me out!' and kicking the backs of the seats,

"No. I tried to talk to her in a soft voice so she wouldn't be frightened of us. I said, 'You're soaking wet, honey.' She said, 'It's raining, stupid.' I asked her if her

mother knew where she was and she said 'Yeah, so?' I didn't know what to do with that answer. Then she started cursing—nastier words in a little kid's mouth you couldn't imagine."

"Really?"

"Steve and I looked at each other and without speaking we decided what to do--get her dry, cleaned and fed, then try to find out where she belonged."

"You said she was eight when you found her?" asked Bride.

"I guess. She never said and I don't think she knows. Her baby teeth were gone when we took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is flat as a washboard."

Just the mention of a flat chest rocked her back to her problem brace

Bride shot up. Had her ankle not prohibited it she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing into a little girl.

A day later Bride calmed down a little. Since no one noticed the changes in her body, how flat the t shirt hung on her chest, they could be hallucinations. Usually the sound of Evelyn's weaving soothed her, but today the click, knock, click, knock of the shuttle was annoying. She went to the door and called, "Rain, Rain."

The girl was lying in the grass watching a trail of ants going about their civilized business.

"What?" Rain looked up.

"Want to go for a walk?"

"What for?" By the tone of her voice it was clear the ants were far more interesting than Bride's company.

"I don't know," said Bride.

That answer seemed to please. She jumped up smiling and brushing her shorts. "Okay. Sure."

The quiet was easy at first as each appeared to be deep into her own thoughts. Bride limping, Rain skipping or dawdling along the verge of bushes and grass. Half a mile down the road Rain's husky voice broke the silence.

"They stole me."

"Who? You mean Steve and Evelyn?" Bride stopped and watched Rain scratch the back of her calf. "They said they found you, sitting in the rain."

"True."

"So why did you say 'stole'?"

"Because I didn't ask them to take me and they didn't ask if I wanted to go."

"Then why did you?"

"I was wet. Evelyn dried me and gave me a box of raisins to eat."

"Are you sorry they took you?" I guess not, thought Bride, otherwise you would have run away.

"Oh, no. Never. This is the best place. Besides there's no place else to go." Rain yawned and rubbed her nose.

"You mean you don't have a home?"

"I used to but my mother lives there."

"You ran away."

"No, ^{I didn't.} She ^{threw} put me out. Said 'Get out.' So I did."

"Why? Why would she do that?" Why would anybody do that to a child, Bride wondered. Even Dearest

who for years couldn't bear to look at or touch her never threw her out.

"Because I bit him."

"Bit who?"

"Some guy. A regular. One of the ones she let do it to me. Oh, look. Blueberries!" Rain was searching through roadside bushes.

"Wait a minute," Bride said. "Do what to you?"

"He stuck his thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his five dollar bill and made me stand outside." The berries were bitter, not the wild sweet stuff she expected. "She wouldn't let me back in. I kept pounding. She opened it once to throw me my sweater." Rain spit the last bit of blueberry into the dirt.

A smooth ridge of rock jutted parallel to the road. Bride Took Rain's hand and led her gently to the stone where they both sat.

"Tell me," she said. "Tell me."

And she did, her emerald eyes sparkling as she described the savvy, the memory, the determination needed for street life. You had to find out where the public toilets were, how to avoid Children's Services, police, how to escape drunks; knowing where sleep is safest, learning what kinds of people will give you money and why, the back doors of which food pantries or restaurants had sympathetic servers. The biggest problem was finding food and storing it for later. She deliberately made no friends of any kind—young or old, stable or wandering. Anybody could turn you in or hurt you. Sex workers were the kindest and the ones who

warned her about their trade. She didn't need reminding because once when some really old guy hurt her so bad she bled, her mother slapped him and screamed Get Out, then she douched her with a yellow powder. Men scared her and made her feel sick. She had been waiting on some steps at the Salvation Army food truck stop when it began to rain. A lady on it might give her a coat or shoes this time like other times when she had slipped her food. That's when Evelyn and Steve came along and when he touched her she'd had to run off, miss the food lady and hide.

Rain giggled on occasion as she described her homeless life, relishing her smarts, her escapes, while Bride fought against the danger of tears for anyone other than herself. Listening to this tough little girl who wasted no time on self-pity she felt a companionship that

was completely free of envy. Like the closeness of school girls.

RAIN

She's gone my black lady. That time I saw her stuck in the car her eyes scared me at first. ^{But really} I like her a lot ~~now~~.
 Today ^{her} the car came back with a busted up door of another color. I feel sad now she's gone. I don't know who I can talk to. Evelyn is real good to me so is Steve but they frown or look away if I say stuff about how it was in my mother's house or if I start to tell them how smart I was. ^{My black lady listens to me tell how it was.}
 when I was thrown out. ^{Steve and Evelyn} They think I can read but I can't, well maybe a little—signs and stuff. Evelyn is trying to teach me. I don't have a daddy I mean I don't know who

Steve is always here
unless he's ~~working~~ doing
day work somewhere.

96

he is because he didn't live in my mother's house. My
black lady is tough but nice too. When we went back
home after I told her everything a truck with big boys in
it passed us. One of them hollered 'Hey, Rain. Who's
your mammy?' My black lady didn't turn around but I
stuck out my tongue and thumbed my nose at him. One of
them was Regis a boy I know because he comes to our
house sometimes with his father to give us firewood or
baskets of corn. The driver turned the truck around so
they could come after us. Regis pointed a shotgun just
like Steve's at us. My black lady saw him and threw her
^{arm}~~hand~~ in front of my face. The birdshot messed up her
hand and wrist. Not too much blood but lots of holes. We
fell, both of us, her on top of me. I saw Regis duck down
as the truck raced its engine and shot off. What could I do
but help her up and hold her arm as we hurried back to
our house. ^{as fast as her ankle let her} Steve picked the tiny pellets out saying he was

going to warn Regis' father. Evelyn washed the blood off her skin and poured iodine all over her hand. My black lady made a hurt face but she didn't cry. My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own selves in danger to save me. My life.

She's gone now but who knows maybe I'll see her again sometime.

I miss my black lady.

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 to the man as touching them, because they were calling to him, seductively exposing their plump thighs and panties as

PART TWO

Chapter Four

Booker's fist was in the man's mouth before thinking about it. A light spray of blood dappled his t-shirt and when the man lost consciousness, he grabbed his book bag off the ground and walked away—not too fast—but fast enough to cross the road, turn his shirt inside out and make it to class on time. He didn't, but there were a few others sneaking into the auditorium when he arrived. The latecomers took seats in the last rows and plopped backpacks, brief cases or laptops on their desks. Only one of them, beside himself, had a notebook. He preferred pencil on paper but his swollen fingers and just one on the swing. None apparently had noticed the man made writing difficult. So he listened a little, day dreamed a little and

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 to the man as touching them, because ~~clearly~~ ~~obviously~~ they were calling to him, seductively exposing their plump thighs and panties as they climbed up to the slide or pumped air on the swing.

Booker's fist was in the man's mouth before thinking about it. A light spray of blood dappled his t-shirt and when the man lost consciousness, he grabbed his book bag off the ground and walked away—not too fast—but fast enough to cross the road turn his shirt inside out and make it to class on time. He didn't, but there were a ~~latecomers~~ few others sneaking into the auditorium when he arrived. The latecomers took seats in the last rows and plopped backpacks, brief cases or laptops on their desks. Only one of them, beside himself, had a notebook. He preferred pencil on paper but his swollen fingers made writing difficult. So he listened a little, day dreamed a little and

^{covered} ~~scratched~~ his ^{mouth} ~~nose~~ to hide a yawn. The professor was going on and on about Adam Smith's wrongheadedness as he did in almost every lecture as though the history of economics had only one scholar worth trashing. What about Milton Friedman or that idiot Karl Marx? Booker's obsession with Mammon was fairly recent. Four years ago as an undergraduate he'd nibbled courses in several curricula: psychology, political science, humanities, and taken courses in African American Studies where the best professors were brilliant at description but could not answer any question beginning with 'why.' He suspected most of the real answers concerning slavery, lynching, forced labor, reconstruction, Jim Crow, migration, civil rights and revolution were ^{ALL} ~~about~~ money, so as a graduate student he turned to the history of economics to learn how money shaped every single oppression in the world and created all the empires, nations, colonies, with God and His enemies used ^{in order} ~~to~~ reap, then veil, the riches. He liked to contrast the ragged, half-naked King of the Jews

screaming on a cross with the be-jeweled, over dressed Pope
whispering homilies ^{above} ~~from~~ the Vatican's vault.

Unimpressed by the lecture on Adam Smith, his thoughts returned to the man lying exposed near the playground. Normal looking. Probably an otherwise nice man—they always were. The 'nicest man in the world', the neighbors always said. '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 had been raised in a large tight family with no television in sight. In college he lived surrounded by a television/internet world where both the methods of mass communication and the substance of mass communication seemed to him free of insight or knowledge. The weather channels were the only informative sources and they were off base and hysterical most of the time. Having grown up in a book-reading family with only radio and newspapers for day to day information and vinyl records for entertainment, he had to fake his

classmates' enthusiasm for screen sounds blasting from every dorm room, lounge and student friendly bar. He knew he was seriously out of the loop—a Luddite incapable of sharing the exciting world of tech. He had been shaped by talk in the flesh and text on the page. Every Saturday morning, first thing, his parents held conferences with their children to answer two questions put to each of them: 1. What have you learned that is true? (And how do you know?) 2. What problem do you have? Answers to the first ^{Question} ranged from "worms can't fly," "ice burns", "there are only three counties in this state", to "the pawn is mightier than the queen." Topics relevant to the second question might be "A girl slapped me", "My shoe strings broke", "My stomach hurts", "Conjugation." The question about personal problems prompted solutions from any one at the table and after they were solved or left pending the children were sent to bathe and dress—the older ones helping the younger. Booker loved those Saturday morning conferences rewarded by the highlight of the weekends--his mother's huge breakfast feasts. Banquets really. Warm biscuits,

short and flakey; grits snow white and tongue-burning hot; eggs beaten into a pale orange creaminess; sizzling sausage patties, sliced tomatoes, strawberry jam, freshly squeezed orange juice, cold milk in mason jars. The rest of the week they ate modestly—oatmeal, in-season fruit, dried beans and whatever green leaf was available: kale, spinach, cabbage, collards, mustard greens. Those ^{Saturday} ~~Sunday~~ morning menus could vary but they were always sumptuous endings to days of scarcity.

Only during the eight months when no one knew where Adam was did the conferences stop and the quiet tick through the house like a time bomb. His father, ~~Mr. B.~~, refused to play even one of his beloved ragtime, old time, bluesy records some 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. In a culvert.

Only Booker and his father looked at the remains. Filthy, rat-gnawed with a single open eye-socket, the maggots, overfed and bursting with glee had gone home. His mother could not go there. She refused to have etched in her brain anything other than her image of ^{her first born's} his young outrageous beauty. The closed coffin funeral seemed cheap and lonely to Booker, in spite of the preacher's loud eloquence, the crowds of neighbors attending, the mounds of food cooked and delivered to their kitchen. The very excess made him lonelier. It was as though his older brother, close as the ghost twin, was being buried again, suffocating under song, sermon, tears, crowds and flowers. He wanted to re-dress the mourning—make it private, special and, most of all, his alone. Adam was the brother he worshipped, two years older and as strong and sweet as cane. The last time Booker saw him he was skate boarding down the sidewalk in twilight, his yellow t-shirt florescent under the trees. It was early September and nothing anywhere had begun to die. Oak leaves behaved as though their green was immortal. The sun began turning

not

aggressively alive in the process of setting. Down the sidewalk between hedges and towering trees Adam floated, a ^{spot} pot of gold moving down a shadowy tunnel toward the mouth of a living sun.

Adam was more than brother to Booker, more than the "A" of parents who named their children alphabetically. He was a friend—the one who knew what Booker was thinking, feeling, before he did, whose humor was both raucous and instructive but never cruel, who cherished each of his siblings but especially Booker.

Remembering that last sighting of yellow tunneling down the street Booker placed one yellow rose on the coffin lid and another, later, graveside.

After the funeral
The house returned to its routine with the background sounds of Satchmo, Etta James, Sydney Bechet, Jelly Roll, King Oliver, and Bunk Johnson. And the conferences and breakfast feasts continued with the rest of the children: Carole, Donovan, Ellie, Favor, and Goodman. The family perked up like Sesame Seed puppets hoping

cheer, if intensive enough, could soothe the living and quiet the dead. Booker thought their strained joking and made up problems misguided and insulting. Fearful of another crisis that could eliminate the soul stretching music his father played which Booker counted on to oil and straighten his tangled feelings, he asked his father if he could take trumpet lessons. Mr. ^{Raybern} B. agreed provided his son earned half the cost. With relief he skipped the Saturday conferences for trumpet lessons that dampened his budding intolerance for his siblings. How could they pretend it was over? What happened? Who and where was the murderer?

^{trumpet} His teacher, already slightly drunk early in the morning, was nevertheless an excellent musician and an even better instructor. "You got the lungs, the hands, now you need the lip. When you get all three you can forget about them and let the music out."

Six years later when Booker was fourteen and a faintly accomplished trumpet player, the nicest man in the world was caught, tried, convicted of SSS, the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys

each of whose names, beginning with Adam's, was tattooed across the shoulders of the nicest man in the world. Adam. Boise. Lenny. Matthew. Kevin. Roland. The tattoo artist said he thought they were the names of his client's children, not those of other people.

The nicest man in the world was an easy-going car mechanic who did home repairs if asked. He was especially helpful with old refrigerators—the Philcos and GE's built in the fifties to last. "Dirt," he said. "Most machinery died because they were never cleaned." Everyone who had used his services remembered that advice. Another feature some remembered was his smile, how welcoming, attractive even. Otherwise he was fastidious, capable and, well, nice. The single other thing people remembered most about him was that he always, always wore a string tie with a horseshoe pin. The police withheld what details they could, but the families of the slaughtered six could not be stopped. Nightmares about what had been done to their children did not outweigh the reality. Six years of grief and unanswered questions coalesced around their recollections of time

. n 7

spent in the morgue, heaving, weeping, stone-faced or on their backs in helpless faints. Evidence of bondage, penetrations, desecrations and surgery was explicit. The rage, the noise, the public clamor upon the arrest of the nicest man in the world disturbed Booker deeply and he struggled to find some way to freeze and personalize his mourning, separate it from other victim's families. Adam's calamity was not public fare. It was private, intimate belonging only to the two brothers. A year later just before he entered college a satisfactory solution arrived. Re-enacting the gesture he'd made at Adam's funeral, he had a small rose tattooed on his left shoulder. Was this the same chair, the same needle used for the killer? Booker didn't ask. The artist couldn't do the dazzling yellow of Booker's memory, so they settled for pale red.

Booker's enchantment with campus life, the classes, the professors, his lively, know-it-all classmates did not wane for two years. All he did from freshman year to sophomore was react—sneer, laugh, dismiss, find fault, demean--a young man's version of

. n 8

critical thinking. They ranked girls according to porn videos and each other according to movies. The smart ones breezed through classes; the clever ones dropped out. It was as a junior that his mild cynicism morphed into depression. The views of his classmates began to bother him not only because they were predictable but also because they blocked serious inquiry. Unlike the effort to perfect "Wild Cat Blues" on his trumpet, no new or creative thoughts were required in undergraduate society and none penetrated the sweet fog of young transgression. When sarcasm fluttered its triumphant flag and giggles became its oath, when the docile manipulation of professors became routine, Booker reverted to those questions posed by his parents during those Saturday conferences on Decater Street: 1) What have you learned that is true? 2) What problem do you have?

1) So far nothing. 2) Despair.

But when he saw his sister, the weakness turned into its full twin—fury. He picked a quarrel with ^{Carole} Cynthia; she argued back. Their fight escalated and disturbed the whole family. Mr. Starbern shut it down.

"You not the only one grieving. Folks mourn differently," he said.

"Yeah, sure." Booker's tone was hostile, disbelieving.

"You acting like you the ^{only} one loved him. Adam wouldn't want that."

"You don't know what he'd want," Booker successfully fought back tears.

Mr. Starbern rose from the couch. "Well, I do know what I want. I want you civil in this house or out of it."

"Oh, no." Mrs. Starbern whined.

Father and son stared at one another. Booker left, ^{closing} ~~slamming~~ the door behind him. ^{softly}

MTK trip to club - meets musicians

Felicity said OK, sure, when Booker asked if he could bunk at her place for a while. They enjoyed being roommate/lovers for a month or so before each annoyed the other with habits they had not previously paid attention to. Felicity complained about his loud trumpet, his reluctance to party every night with friends. He hated her cigarettes along with her choices of ^{food} take-out, music tapes and wine. In fact, she found him as boring as he found her.

Booker's work history was thin—one semester teaching music in a junior high school and he was cut from the few auditions he signed up for. His trumpet talent was adequate but not

exceptional. His luck changed when Cynthia tracked him down to pass along a letter from a law firm. ^{GRANDPA} Mr. Drew had included his grandchildren in his will and Booker was to share the constantly bragged-about fortune with his siblings. ^{Not a lot but} Not bad. Now he could rent his own place and continue playing at tk and other little weed filled clubs. Having access to no studio, the men played on the street certain weekends. Not for money but to practice and experiment with each other in public before a non-paying, therefore un-critical, undemanding audience.

Simply dumbstruck by the beauty of her. A young, black woman laughing, pulling her hair behind her ears while talking to another woman. A limousine negotiated the curb and both waited for the driver to open the door for them. Smiling Booker walked on to the subway [?] entrance where he played with the three other musicians. No one was there, not tk, or tk or tk and it was only then that he noticed the rain—soft, steady. The raindrops were like diamonds breaking into specks of light on the pavement falling from a pale-blue sky. He decided to play his trumpet anyway alone in the rain knowing that no pedestrians would stop to listen; rather they closed umbrellas as they rushed down the stairs to the trains. Still enthralled to the sheer beauty of the girl he had seen, he put the trumpet to his lips. What emerged was music he had

never played before. Low, muted notes held long, too long as the strains floated through drops of rain.

Booker had no words to describe his feelings. What he did know was that the edges of fall leaves seemed to uncurl when he played while remembering her. Streets with litter at their curbs appeared interesting, not filthy; Bodegas, beauty shops, diners, thrift stores leaning against one another looked homey, downright friendly. Each time the thought of her eyes glittering toward him or her lips open in an inviting, reckless smile, he felt not just a swell of energy but also the disintegration of the haunt and gloom in which for years Adam's death had clouded him. When he stepped through that cloud and became as emotionally content as he had been before Adam skated into the sunset—there she was. A midnight Galatea always and already alive.

A few weeks after that first sighting waiting for a limousine there she was again, standing in line at Rambo's where the Black Gauchos were performing—a hot band, new, upcoming playing Brazilian and New Orleans jazz, one show only. The line was long, loud and jittery but when the doors opened to the crush he managed first to slip for bodies behind her and then, when the crowd found bench seats, he was able to stand right at her back.

In music--powered air, with body rules broken and sexual benevolence thick as cream, putting his arms around her waist seemed more than a natural gesture; it was an

inevitable one. And they danced and danced. When the music stopped his Galatea turned and surrendered unto him the reckless smile he'd always imagined.

When Bride was at work, Booker relished the solitude for trumpet practice. Their lovemaking was serene and long lasting, so necessary Booker deliberately withheld for nights in a row to make the return to her bed brand new. He liked her lack of interest in his personal life. Unlike Felicity there was no probing. Bride's self-love was consistent with her milieu and mirrored his fascination with her. So if she rattled on about co-workers, products and markets he watched her gorgeous face and enjoyed the music of her voice. When she challenged him to choose the most winning shade of lip-gloss, he laughed. Her insistence on white-only clothes amused him. Unwilling to share her with the public he was seldom in the mood for clubbing. He refused her nothing except accompanying her on shopping sprees. Once in a while she dropped the hip, thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control and confessed some flaw or painful memory of childhood. And he, knowing all about how childhood cuts never scabbed over—comforted her while hiding the rage he felt at the idea of anyone hurting her. Bride's complicated relationship with her mother and repellant father meant, like him, she was free of family ties. It was just the two of them and with the exception of her obnoxious friend Norma there were fewer and fewer interruptions from her colleagues. He still played with his friends on weekends, some afternoons, but there were glorious

mornings of sun at the shore, cool evenings holding hands in the park and anticipation with certainty of what they could invent between the sheets.

When Bride was at work, Booker relished the solitude for trumpet practice, scribbling notes to mail to his favorite aunt, Queen, and since there were no books in Bride's apartment—just fashion and gossip magazines—he visited the library often to read or re-read books he ignored or misunderstood while at university. The Name of the Rose, Remembering Slavery, a collection that so moved him he composed music to commemorate the narratives. He read Twain enjoying the cruelty of his humor. He read Frederick Douglass, loving the eloquence that both hid and displayed his fury.

Six months into the bliss of sex, music, books and easy undemanding company it collapsed and Booker ran away.

DRAFT INSERT

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. 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 pubic 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 an egg yolk 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 or fear what she had gotten herself into. She flat out refused cowering. 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 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 all that writing he used to send me."

"Is he here?"

"Uh uh. Nearby, though."

"Where nearby?" More driving Bride supposed.

"You can walk it, but come on in. Booker ain't 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 glossary

of compliments in one stroke. Once again she was the ugly, too black little girl in her mother's house.

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, cleverly mis-matched. Small antiques such as picture frames and side tables were placed haphazardly. 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 spoons with filigreed handles.

Bride sat down at a narrow dinner table on a chair with decorative seat cushions 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."

"Bed bugs," said Queen. "Every year I burn them out before they get started."

"Oh, I never heard of that," Bride said, then, after a pause, "What kind of stuff did Booker send you? You said he sent some writings?"

"He did. Every now and then."

"What were they?"

"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 foundation or something in his brother's name. They weren't interested. At all. I have to take some responsibility for the break-up. I told him to keep his brother 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 few in between." Now she was laughing, "So many men and all of them the same where it counts."

"Where does it count?"

"Ownership."

So many husbands but still all alone, thought Bride. "Don't you have any kids?"

"Lots. Two live with their fathers and their new wives; two joined the military—one a marine, one in the air force; another, my last, a daughter is in medical school; the next to last is 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 odd places. "And I know how and what

they think. Booker stays in touch, though. Here, I'll show you how and what he thinks." Queen moved to a cabinet where sewing materials were neatly hanging or stacked. From its floor she lifted an old fashioned breadbox. After sorting through its contents, she selected a handful of papers clipped together and gave them to Bride.

What lovely handwriting, thought Bride, suddenly realizing that she'd never seen anything he wrote—not even his name. There were seven pages one sheet for each month they were together—plus one more. 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.

Bride read the words 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 AWFU 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 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 DAPPLIED 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, imitating the voice of a two-

year old: "I don't know why there's no sun up in the sky. I can't go on. Every thing I had is gone. Stormy weather."

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

"Why? I have to know, Booker."

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

"Hell, 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---"

125 24

comp. p. 118

"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---"

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

"I know that, but---"

"But nothing. I was trying to make up for somebody I hurt. You just ran around blaming everybody. Bastard. 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 don't have to love me but you damn well have to respect me." She sat down and crossed her legs.

add 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.

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

"Alright. I know that but...

"But nothing. I was trying to make up to somebody I ruined. You just ran around blaming everybody.

Bastard. Here, wipe your face." Bride threw a dishtowel toward him and put down what was left of the bottle.

After wiping her palms on her jeans and brushing hair from her damp forehead. She looked steadily at Booker.

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

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 his

tongue froze---the words were not there. No matter.

Bride was asleep, her chin pointing toward her chest, her long legs splayed.

She woke in sunshine from a dreamless sleep—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 pull-down table. She joined him and picked a strip of bacon from his plate and ate it. Then she bit into his toast.

“Want more?” Booker asked.

“No. No thanks.”

“Coffee? Juice?”

“Well, coffee maybe.”

“Sure.”

Bride rubbed her eyelids trying to replay the moments before she fell asleep. The swelling over Booker's left ear helped. "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 in front of her. "She's an original. Doesn't recognize crazy."

Bride blew away the coffee's steam. "She showed me the things you mailed her. Your writing. When I read them I knew they were all about me, right?"

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

"You know what I mean. You wrote them when we were together."

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

"You still believe 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, from a music repair shop. Sonny's Pawn Palace. So I went there."

"Why?"

"To pay them, idiot. They told me where you were from. This so-called town, and that you had an aunt here that you always talked about. Mrs. Olive."

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

"Maybe. I didn't plan it. Anyway I brought you your trumpet. Is there more coffee?"

"You got it?"

"It's fixed too, I guess."

"Where is it? At Queen's?"

"In the trunk of my car."

said then
she threw him the car keys

Booker's smile traveled from his lips to his eyes. The joy in his face was infantile. "I love you! Love you!" he shouted and ran out the door.

It began slowly, gently as it often does; shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way, tentative at first because who knows how it might turn out, 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 rotting at the trailer's two back 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. Smoker was

131

sneaking from the sills and the door saddle when they broke in. First Booker, then Bride, on his heels, dropped to the floor where smoke was thinnest and crawled to the couch where Queen lay lifeless. With his one good 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—just enough time for Bride to pull off her t shirt and use it to smother the head fire.

When, with stinging, singed palms, she tore away the now

sooty, smoking shirt, she grimaced 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, come on lady." Queen was breathing—at least coughing and vomiting, a major sign of life. The crowd was bigger now and seemed transfixed—but not at the patient being trundled into the ambulance. They were focused, wide-eyed on Bride's lovely, plump breasts. However pleased 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, is 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 doubt it; she calls 'Hannah. Hannah.' Booker and Bride wait days for her 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, ruined, useless. Sits on riverbank hands crossed, head bowed. Bride waits in the car until he joins her]

134

The quiet is thick, suffocating. Bride breaks into the unbearable silence.

"I'm pregnant."

"What did you say?"

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

Booker gazed at her, looked away than back. "No," he said. "It's ours."

He took her hand. Fingers entwined, both leaned back on the headrests and let their spines sink into the seat's soft hide of cattle.

All Goodness A child. ^{clean} New life. Innocent. Knowing nothing of death, unsullied by memories of mangled tortured boys, rose tattoos; no shades of an unborn twin, no dangerous lies told to earn love; no hasty oblivious romances, above

135

vanity, cowardice, missing body parts and disappointing families.

They believe.

ALL Goodness A child. ^{clean}New life. [^]Innocent. Immune to evil or illness; protected from kidnap, [^]beating's, molestation, bullets, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error.

So they believe.