



## God Help the Child Draft, as "The Wrath of Children"

---

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 "The Wrath of Children"

1 folder

### Contact Information

---

### Download Information

---

Date Rendered: 2019-09-05 01:24:24 PM UTC

Available Online at: <http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/f7623j17q>

THE WRATH OF CHILDREN

BRIDE

## THE WRATH OF CHILDREN

JUNE 201

Stone

### BRIDE

Disappearing here. Piece by piece I am losing parts of my body. A little

here, a shrinkage there. I don't know why I'm melting away but I

know when it started. It began after he said, "You not the woman I

thought you were."

Only I said that. It just popped out of my mouth. But hearing my own

words back before putting on his jeans. Then he grabbed his boots and

opened the door. I waited for a split second if he was not just

leaving but ending our relationship. I figured that later that

night when he lay down, the door tick open and close. But I heard nothing.

Was I? I'm not writing enough? I don't know. I don't know.

When he was gone, I was so angry, so sad, so lonely, so

## THE WRATH OF CHILDREN

[JUNE 26]

Part ONE

BRIDE

I am disappearing here. Piece by piece I am losing parts of my body. A little erasure here, a shrinkage there. I don't know why I'm melting away but I think I do know when it started. It began after he said, "You not the woman I want."

"Neither am I."

I still don't know why I said that. It just popped out of my mouth. But hearing my sass he shot me a strange look before putting on his jeans. Then he grabbed his boots and t-shirt and when I heard the door slam I wondered for a split second if he was not just ending our silly argument, but ending us, our relationship. I figured that later that evening I would hear the key turn, the door click open and close. But I heard nothing the whole night. What? I'm not exciting enough? I can't have thoughts of my own? By morning I was furious. Glad he was gone. I was so angry you would have thought I had



Something is happening here. And  
 I'm scared. Let me tell you what I know.  
 I am

spent those 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, <sup>our</sup> ~~the~~ affair wasn't all that spectacular--not even the mildly dangerous sex I used to enjoy. Well, anyway it was nothing like those double page spreads in fashion magazines, you know, couples standing half naked in surf, looking so 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 comparing us to magazine spreads and music, I can't say, but it tickled me to settle on "I Wanna Dance with Somebody."

It was raining the next day. Bullet taps on the windows followed by crystal lines of water. I avoided the temptation to glance through the panes at the sidewalk beneath my condo. Besides I knew what was out there—palm trees lining the road, benches in the little park, few if any pedestrians, a sliver of sea far beyond. I fought giving in to the <sup>expectation</sup> ~~hope~~ that <sup>he</sup> ~~was~~ coming back. <sup>Around noon</sup> 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 beautiful man, flawless even except for a tiny scar on his upper lip and an ugly one on his shoulder—a plum red blob with a tail. Otherwise, head to toe, he is one gorgeous man. I'm not so bad myself, so imagine how we looked as a couple. After a glass or two I was a little buzzed, and decided to call my friend Norma, tell her all about it. How he hit me harder than a fist with six words. How they rattled me so I agreed with them. But I changed my mind about calling her 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 the office for me to distract my best friend and colleague with personal gossip about another stupid 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 hip with six cool 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 mine, all mine—the idea, the brand, the <sup>campaign</sup> ~~packaging~~.

Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn't help smiling at the lipstick smile on my wine glass, thinking "How you like that, Lula Ann?"

Maybe she 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 dumb country-fied 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 Saturday afternoon trips 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, equally 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](http://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, and bought a three thousand dollar 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 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 about my promise he left. I must have threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him. Bastard. I paid the rent and the maid. When we went to clubs and

concerts we rode in cars I hired. I bought him beautiful shirts--although he never wore them—and did all the shopping. Besides, a promise is a promise especially if it's to oneself. (over)

<sup>1</sup>  
~~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 being forced to read 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 Correctional Center, 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 and adding wing after wing to house increasing waves of violent wicked women committing bloody female crimes. Lucky for the state, crime does pay.



When I got dressed I noticed  
the first peculiar thing. My pubic hair  
was gone. Not just gone as in shaved,  
but gone as in erased, as in never  
having been there in the first place.  
It startled me so I ~~hunched~~ threaded <sup>through</sup> the  
hair on my head to see if it was  
shedding. But it was as thick and  
slippery as it had always been. Skin  
disease perhaps? It worried me but  
there was no time to ~~check~~ do more  
than be curious and somewhat anxious.  
I had to be on my way to ~~over~~ keep my promise.

The couple of times I drove to Decagon before I never tried to get inside on some pretext or other. Back 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 the curbside busses, old Toyotas and second hand trucks my car, sleek, rat gray with a vanity license looked like a gun. But it was 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 teen-age hooker-ette eager to get back 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-ette would



think 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 counted ~~the~~ 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. At exactly four thirty only the Town car is left, owned probably by a lawyer with an alligator brief case full of papers, money and cigarettes. 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, encouraging but I could hardly hear her. "There's nothing to be afraid of. She can't hurt you."

No, she can't and here she is. Number 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 <sup>that</sup> the parents called her. <sup>shaking with anger</sup> "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." <sup>little</sup> "My boy will never recover," "Devil."

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 <sup>little Botox some</sup> 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. <sup>\*</sup> In the rear view mirror

<sup>\*</sup> Just as I'm about to enter the exit ramp <sup>I see</sup> the taxi shoot ahead

~~above~~ <sup>head</sup>  
 I see the taxi slow then turn toward Norristown instead of the exit ramp  
<sup>follow them.</sup>  
~~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, <sup>a</sup>  
 back yard patio. The <sup>place</sup> ~~road~~ looks like a kindergarten drawing of light blue,  
 white or 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 the houses, next to 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. Only one other car is in  
 the parking area—a black SUV. 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 kindergarteners 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



taxi's left turn <sup>signal</sup> ~~light~~ just before it passes me  
and shoots beyond the exit ramp forward

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.

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 SUV until she comes out.

3 A. is painted on the door she unlocks. 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'm black as midnight and dressed in all white so maybe she thinks it's a uniform and I'm an authority of some sort. 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 or my face; 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 stiletto-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, far off 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."

She coughs for some time and I hand her a tissue. "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 and fake-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 not take looks with products that can't improve her own? There isn't enough 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.

Her voice is whiney and she is shaking.



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 blue-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 You,Girl 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, adjusts the sling holding her right arm, 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. And who knows how that might turn out?

Have black folk's blood in their veins? Quest: Twenty per cent, I

heard.

I hate to say it but from the very beginning she embarrassed me, and

not just in the maternity ward. Nursing her was like having a pick-a-

pinny doll sucking my nipple. I went to bottle feeding soon as I got

home. People stared when I pushed her in the baby carriage and

DEAREST when we walked down the street together. I could have

→ ①

I don't know how it happened. I'm light-skinned, what we call high

yellow 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 too thick. Folks said 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. Almost all

mulatto types did that back then in the twenties—if they had the

right kind of hair, that is. Can you imagine how many white folks



have black folk's blood in their veins? Guess. Twenty per cent, I heard.

I hate to say it but from the very beginning she embarrassed me, and not just in the maternity ward. Nursing her was like having a pick-a-ninny doll sucking my nipple. I went to bottle feeding soon as I got home. 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 our colors was reversed. <sup>didn't take</sup> [I ~~stopped taking~~ her with me <sup>specially</sup> when I had to look for a place to live. It was hard enough just being a colored woman—<sup>even a high yellow one</sup> ~~light brown~~ like her father—trying to rent in a decent part of the city. Back in the eighties when she was born, the law was 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. Leigh. I know he upped the rent five extra dollars from what he advertised, and he has a fit if you a minute late with the money. Of course I couldn't take her with me when I applied. And if it wasn't enough being that dark, <sup>and having thick lips</sup> she had funny colored eyes, something witchy about them too. ]

I know that's what did it; what caused the fights between me and my husband. <sup>→ ②</sup> It got so bad he just up and left and I had to look for <sup>⑤</sup>

another, cheaper place to live. I never did convince him that I aint <sup>③</sup> never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying and treated Lula Ann like she came from the womb of a stranger. Not just a stranger—an enemy. He never touched her, ~~and~~ if I felt his coldness, she must of froze in it.

<sup>⑥</sup> So it was just us two. I guess he felt <sup>a little bit after</sup> real bad leaving us like that because a few months later on he found out where I moved to and started sending me money <sup>twice a</sup> every month though I never asked him to and didn't go to court to get it. <sup>His fifty dollar money orders Job</sup> That and my night work at the hospital's janitorial service got me and her off welfare. Which was a good thing. Those welfare clerks are mean as spit. When I got off I was making more money than they ever did, so I guess meanness filled out their skimpy paycheck which is why they treated us like we

was beggars. <sup>How not to make trouble</sup> Still and all, I was careful. Strict too. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, <sup>I don't care how many times she changed her name</sup> Especially because of her color. <sup>was across she would always carry.</sup>

Even when things got better  
I had to be careful  
Husband being an abandoned  
wife. And I had to be



① *it's not my fault.* She was black,  
too black. ~~Nobody in my family~~

② We had 3 good years of marriage  
~~before~~ <sup>but when</sup> she was born he blamed me.

③ here

We argued and argued till I told him it  
④ must be from his own family - not  
mine. <sup>then</sup> it got worse

BRIDE

She really was a freak. Sofia Huxley. The quick change from obedient ex-con to feral predator. From slack-lipped to fangs. From slouch to hammer. I never saw the signal—no grip of neck cords, no shoulder flex. Nothing announced her attack on me. I'll never forget it and even if I tried to the scars let alone the shame 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 here just to gaze and pity me. Television is idiotic—mostly death, lipstick and the thighs of anchor



girls. How can I take seriously crime shows where the female detectives track killers in Le Boutin heels. And not only does print makes me dizzy, 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 Vicodan 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 molestations. 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 stared at me then opened her mouth as though to say something. 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



before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. 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, 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 afraid even to whimper.

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. 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 my face in the 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 second interview 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 soufflé every time they see you."

That made me laugh. "Or Oreos?"

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



At first it was boring shopping for white only clothes until I learned how many shades of white there were: ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white snow, cream, ecru, champagne, ghost, bone. Shopping got even more interesting when I began choosing colors for accessories.

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. All sable and ice. A panther in snow. And with your body? Please!"

I took his advice and it worked. Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the staring, frowning 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 quickest. 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 look wider 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 lanes 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 brushing and then the razor, the combination that both excites and soothes me. Lets me imagine without grief times when I was made fun of and hurt.

"She's sort of pretty under all that black." Teachers, neighbors agreed. Dearest never attended parent-teacher meetings or volleyball games. I was encouraged to take business courses not the college track, community college instead of four-year state universities. I didn't do any of that. After I don't know how many refusals, I finally got a job working stock—never sales where customers would see me. I wanted the cosmetics counter but didn't dare ask for it. I 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 and told me to come back later. 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 about my work. Baby-talking me through what I thought was serious conversation before they found more ego props elsewhere.

Then him. Booker. Booker Starbern.

I don't want to think about him now. I don't want to remember how handsome he is, perfect except for that ugly burn scar on his shoulder. I touched every inch of him—I know the quality of the hair in his armpit; I fingered the dimple in his upper lip; I poured red wine on his navel and drank its spill. I have to stop re-living 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! She could have said, "No thanks," or even "Get out!" No. She went postal. Maybe fist 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 into which I drop 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 used mostly by 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 loving but limited vocabularies.

I select a bench near an artificial pond where real ducks sail. And though I quickly block a memory of his describing the difference between wild drakes and yard birds, my muscles remember cool massaging fingers. While I turn pages and scan pictures of the young and eatable, I hear slow steps on gravel. I look up. The steps belong to a gray-haired couple strolling by, silently 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 teen-age 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 space ship



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. 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 finger the bristles of the shaving brush. They are soft and warm.

DEAREST

Yeah, I still feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little but in the end she made me proud as a peacock. It was in that case with that gang of pervert teachers that she knocked it out of the park. Young as she was she behaved like a grown up on the witness stand—so calm and sure of herself. She 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. And I bought her a pair of earrings.

Taught me a lesson. What you do to children matters. And they never forget. She don't come by or visit at all. She sends me money and stuff every now and then, but I ain't seen her in I don't know how long.



BRIDE

Norma picks the restaurant. Pirate, it's called, a semi-chic, once hot, now barely hanging on place for tourists and the decidedly 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 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 the sesame seeds from the filet 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." She covers her mouth to keep food from escaping her laughter.

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 bite the tip of an asparagus stalk then slowly cross my knife and fork.

"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, trying to steady myself and make what I say sound normal. "I lied, girlfriend. I lied to you."



Nobody 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.

"Lunatic!" 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 always 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 phone number in South Dakota.

"Look at me, 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?"

"Right. Sorta. I guess."

"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 smiling.

"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 all the 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 triangle way 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. A panther in snow.

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 my 'total person' designer and sometimes, like now, diamonds. Wait. This is impossible. After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb? Maybe from the plastic surgery or 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, 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. Still 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 filthy jokes, stumble through  
 conversations with co-workers, drink <sup>three four</sup> ~~twice~~ three times more than what I  
 can gracefully hold. I flirt like a high school brat campaigning 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.

Calmed I go back to bed and 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? I'm young; I'm pretty. Why am I so miserable? Because he left me? 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. Correct what you can; learn from what you can't."

"I don't always know what to 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. Clarity. What if it was the landlord my finger was really pointing at in that courtroom? What that teacher was accused of was sort of 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 meanings—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 botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a death-like pallor. And I don't need silicon in my butt. 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 Norma. Still, her calls are fewer and fewer.

## NORMA

I thought he was a pervert. I don't care how wild a dancing crowd is 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 the subway entrance. 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. Another time I saw him sitting at a coffee shop table writing in a tiny notebook. 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 slowly followed. He watched 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. Bastard. 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 writers 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 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 in beach chairs, he started talking to me about the history of water in California. A bit boring, yes, and I was sort of interested. Still, I fell asleep.

I have no idea what occupied him when I was at the office and I never asked. I thought he liked me more because I never probed him about his past or nagged him, that I left him his private life. I thought it showed how much I trusted him—that it was him I was attracted to, not what he did. Every girl I know introduces her boyfriend as a lawyer or artist or club owner or broker or whatever. The job, not the person was what the girlfriend adored. I shouldn't have—trusted him I mean. 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 fill the basket on the table near 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. One is from Dearest. "Hi, Honey," then stuff about the nursing home before the usual hint for money. The other is addressed to Booker Starbern from Salvatore Ponti on seventeenth street. I tear it open and find a reminder invoice. Sixty-eight dollars overdue. I don't know whether to trash the invoice or go see what Mr. Ponti 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 that after-party the bomb?"

"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."

SOFIA

"How was he? I went to Rocco's with Billy and we..."

"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 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. Ponti's.

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 who they poison or how old they were and the arsonists didn't separate the children from the families they burned. And bomb throwers are not

SOFIA

My cellmate, Julie, was spending time for smothering her disabled daughter.

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 a lot of people. After one month, though, I had to quit because my patient's grandchildren visited her on weekends. My parole officer found me something similar but without children—a nursing home that didn't call itself a hospice but that is what it mostly was. 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 who they poison or how old they were and the arsonists didn't separate the children from the families they burned. And bomb throwers are not selective or known for precision.

My cellmate, Julie, was serving time for smothering her disabled daughter. (over)

Yet she carried a photo of her always. [Big head, slack mouth, the loveliest bluest eyes.] We worked in the sewing shop making uniforms for a medical company that paid us twelve cents an hour. When my fingers got stiff I was moved to the kitchen where I dropped whatever 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, sad and not much company. I thought it was the gang rape, then, the ~~protection~~ of one of the inmates, later ~~lowering~~ enslavement she was in with. An older woman whom no one trifled with.

the child's photo ~~was~~ posted <sup>by her bunk</sup> above  
Big head, slack mouth etc. <sup>that photograph</sup> Not asking  
Julia ~~ch~~ whispered to <sup>every</sup> night, <sup>dead daughter</sup> stories -  
forgiveness, but telling her <sup>^</sup>  
fairy tales mostly.



(over)

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

The very day I was paroled one of the students 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. <sup>\*</sup> She threw money at me <sup>as</sup> she

though <sup>+</sup> that would erase fifteen years of life as death. 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 foolish one she

planned, but the gift neither of us planned--the release of unshed tears.

When I woke up I was clean and able.

\* /N another world her skin color would have been remarkable but <sup>after</sup> Decagon it wasn't.  
 → After 15 years of cloth flats I was more interested in her fashionable shoes: Alligator or snake skin, pointy toes, heels so high they were like stilts. I didn't know what she wanted until she

Nobody liked me enough to want more than <sup>a</sup> casual hook up. Fine, I thought, the less the better.

In all those years

I received exactly two letters from my husband. The first was a Dear Honey letter that turned into complaint like

"I'm being-blacked out word - here, Beaten? Fucked? What <sup>Tortured?</sup> ~~else~~ <sup>other</sup> word would they censor?" The second letter began

'What the hell were you thinking bitch?' No blacked out word there, I didn't answer.

My parents sent me packages - candy bars, tampons, tuna fish - but they never wrote, called or visited. I wasn't surprised; they were always hard to please.



Part  
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 driver 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 and Repair Palace. Inside 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 down the counter 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. Mouthpiece. They're 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 gave him one anyway. Picky guy, real picky."

Bride took the horn thinking she didn't even know Booker owned one or played it. Then she handed Sally the amount owed.

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

*He's not from the country.*  
"Country boy?" 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 burst into snorts of laughter and started calling out other ridiculous names of towns. "Look here," said Sally. "He gave us another address. A forward." He flipped through his rolodex. "Hah. Somebody named Olive. Q. Olive. Whiskey, California."

"No street address?"

"Come on, lady. Who says they have streets in Whiskey?" Sally was having a good time keeping himself amused <sup>as well as</sup> and the pretty lady in his shop. "Tire tracks maybe," he added.

Bride left the shop quickly, but realized just as quickly that there were no roaming cabs. She was forced to return and asked Sally to phone one for her.



The sun and the moon shared the horizon in a distant friendship, each unfazed by the other. Bride didn't notice the light, how carnival it made the sky. <sup>(over)</sup> She thought about both, until she became distracted by ~~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 car's leather interior as well as 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 to prove something to herself. <sup>over</sup> 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 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

~~The trumpet as well as~~

The shaving brush and razor were  
Packed in the trumpet case and stored in the  
trunk.

It was not about love, <sup>lost</sup> ~~as~~ ~~hated~~  
It was because



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 person she made up her mind to confront. The one she had bared her soul to while he was mocking her. It would take courage though, something that being successful in her career she thought she had plenty of. That and enviable beauty.

According to the men at Sally's he was from a place called Whiskey. Maybe he had gone back there. Maybe not. He could be living with Miss Q. Olive, 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 pretty one who ran a major department in a billion dollar company? The one who was already imagining newer product lines—eyelashes for example. In addition to breasts every woman (his kind or not) wanted longer, thicker eyelashes. A woman could be snake thin and starving, but if she had <sup>grapefruit</sup> ~~baseball~~ boobs and raccoon eyes, she was deliriously happy.

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 a state highway, 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 was spotless and empty. The smell of beer and tobacco was not recent nor was the framed confederate flag that 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 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 redneck version of eatable food then asked where the ladies room was. She left a five dollar bill on the counter in case the waitress thought she was skipping. <sup>Then</sup> Standing at the

*In the bathroom she confirmed that there was still reason to be alarmed by a hairless pudenda.*

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 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 <sup>scarey</sup> tiny remembrance of altered ear lobes shook her but she <sup>dared not to connect it to other changes in her body.</sup> ~~quickly erased it.~~

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



"Ain't 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. One hundred and fifty miles? She gassed up, had the tires checked and followed the loop back 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 <sup>could</sup> might have been the world's first and biggest beech tree circled by bushes hiding its lower trunk. Bride fought the air bag, moving so fast and in such panic 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 <sup>rocked</sup>  
 with pain. Nothing helped. She lay there awkwardly on  
 the driver's seat trying to ease her left foot out of the  
 elegant rabbit furred boot. Her efforts proved both  
 painful and impossible. Stretching and twisting she  
 managed to get <sup>to</sup> her cell phone, but its face was blank  
 except for the 'no service' message. The likelihood of a  
 passing car was dim in the dark but possible so she  
 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 she could do but lie there  
 the rest of the night by turns afraid, angry, in pain,  
 weepy. Even the stars, seen through the tree limb that  
 had fallen like a throttling arm across the windshield,  
<sup>frightened</sup> ~~alarmed~~ her. The bit of sky she could glimpse was like a  
 carpet of knife points aching to be released toward her.



She felt world-hurt—an awareness of malign forces changing her from a courageous adventurer into a fugitive.

The sun merely hinted at its rise, an apricot slice teasing the sky with a promise of revealing its whole self. Bride whipped by body cramp and leg pain felt a tingle of hope along with the dawn. A helmet-less motorcyclist, a truck 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 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 and surrounding trees coming alive in the light really 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. Bearded with long blonde hair and slitted black eyes. Rape? Murder? Bride was dizzy watching him squint at her through the window. Then he

went around to the driver's door. *Swallowing terrified she watched him*  
 After removing the  
 branch from the hood *then pry and* ~~he pried then~~ yanked the door open.

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

*(His hair hung forward as lifted her out of the car seat.)*



along he carried Bride half a mile down a sandy path  
 leading to a house. She said *don't hurt me please don't hurt me* ~~thank you, thank you thank~~  
~~you and then fainted.~~ *before fainting*

"Why is her skin so black?"

"For the same reason yours is so white."

"Oh. You mean like my kittens?"

"Right. Born that way."

Bride sucked her teeth. What an easy conversation  
 between mother and daughter. She was 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 *instead of raping or* asked his *killing her*  
 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 bearded 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 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, this is Raisin. Actually we named her Rain because that is where we found her, but she prefers to call herself Raisin."

"Thank you, Raisin. You saved my life. Really."

Bride, grateful for another vanity 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 mindful of the propped-up leg 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 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—milk white skin,

ebony hair, neon eyes, undetermined age. What had Evelyn said? "That's where she was when we found her?" In the rain.

Steve and Evelyn's house seemed to be a converted studio or machine shop: one large space containing table, chairs, sink, wood burning cook stove and the scratchy couch Bride lay on. Against a wall stood a loom with baskets of yarn nearby. 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 Evelyn and the girl chopped mushrooms and green peppers at the obviously home made table. Without warning they began to sing.



"This land is my land; this land is your land...."

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 empathy he examined her ankle and announced it fractured at the least and unfixable here in Steve's house—she needed 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 worsen.

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

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

Steve carried her to the truck and as they drove back from the clinic she had to admit the splint 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."

Following an x ray, Doctor Muskie told her she would live but she would probably need a month at the least to heal—maybe six weeks. "Syndesmosis", he said to his uncomprehending patient. "Between the fibula and the tibia. Maybe surgery, probably not, if you do what I say."

He put her ankle in a splint, saying he would give her a cast when the swelling decreased. And she would have to come back for it.

Two hours later she was back in the truck sitting next to a silent Steve with her left leg sticking as straight under the dashboard as the splint allowed. 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 your ankle is ready, I'll heat water for the washtub."

Slop jar, outhouse toilet, metal washtub, broke down scratchy couch for a month? Bride started to cry and they let her while they ate an early dinner.

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 <sup>thick</sup> 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. Yet her gratitude and embarrassment were short lived. They



were treating her like a stray cat or a dog with a broken leg that they felt sorry for. Sullen and picking at her fingernails, she asked Evelyn whether she had a nail file or any nail polish. Evelyn smiled and held up her own hands without speaking. Point taken—Evelyn's hands were less for holding the stem of a wine glass and more for chopping <sup>Kindling</sup> ~~kindle~~ and wringing the necks of chickens. Who are these people, wondered Bride, and where did they come from? They hadn't asked her where she was from or where she was going. They simply tended her, fed her, arranged for her car to be towed for repair. Days passed with boredom unbroken. Steve and Evelyn occasionally spent time after supper sitting outside singing songs by the Beatles or Simon and Garfunkle-- Steve strumming his guitar, Evelyn joining him in sweet soprano. Their laughter tinkling between wrong lines and missed notes.

In the following weeks of more visits to the clinic, leg exercises and waiting for 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 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 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."

"Means 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 six weeks sleeping in a house of such deep darkness at night it was like a coffin. Outside the sky would be loaded with more stars than she had ever seen before. But in here under a filthy skylight and no electricity she had trouble sleeping.

Finally Dr. Muskie returned to remove her cast and added a foot brace so she could limp about. She glimpsed

the disgusting skin that had been hidden underneath the cast and shivered. Later 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 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 had 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 tee shirt and a pair of her own jeans. The pants were so large she exchanged them for a pair of Rain'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. Booker's 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, but 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, 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."

"Sure," said Bride. Acting normal was important, she thought. It might even restore the body changes—or halt them. She 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



liquor 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 some liquor into a cup.

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

Bride listened intently. Anything. Anything to stop thinking first about how her body was changing and second how to make sure no one noticed. When Evelyn handed her the tee shirt as she stepped out of the tub Evelyn didn't notice or 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~~ <sup>under arm</sup> ~~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 thought. His curse.

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

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

"We did. Steve and I were driving home from an anti-war protest and saw this little girl, sopping wet on a brick doorstep. He slowed down then put on the brakes. Both of us thought she was lost or her door key was. He parked, got out and went to see what was wrong."



"What did she say?"

"Nothing. Not a word. <sup>drenched as she was</sup> 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 continue toward 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."

"Did she quiet down?"

"No. She kept hollering 'Let me out,' and kicking the back of our seats. 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, bitch.' I asked her if



her mother knew she was sitting outside in the rain 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 about six 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 skateboard."

Bride shot up. Just the mention of a flat chest yanked her back to her problem. Had her ankle not

prohibited it she would have run, rocketed away from the scary suspicion that she was changing into a little girl.

One night and a day later Bride had calmed down a little. Since no one noticed the changes in her body, how flat the tee shirt hung on her chest, the un-pierced ear lobes. Only she knew about un-shaved but absent armpit and pubic hair. So all of this might be hallucinations like the vivid dreams she was having when she managed to fall asleep. Or were they? Twice at night she woke to find Rain standing over her or squatting nearby—not threatening just staring. But when she spoke to the girl, she seemed to disappear.

Usually the sound of Evelyn's weaving at the loom soothed her, but today the click, knock, click, knock of the shuttle and pedal was disturbing. 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, if you wanna."

The quiet between them 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."

"Yep."

"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, freezing too. Evelyn gave me a blanket and 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 <sup>pushed her hair away from her forehead</sup> yawned and rubbed her ~~nose~~.



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

"I used to but my mother lives there."

"So you ran away."

"No I didn't. She threw 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 pee 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 on the door. She opened it once to throw me my sweater." Rain spit the last bit of blueberry into the dirt.

As Bride imagined the scene her stomach fluttered. How could anybody do that to a child, any child, and one's own? "Suppose you saw your mother again what would you say to her?"

Rain grinned. "Nothing. I'd chop her head off."

"Oh, Rain. You don't mean that."

"Yes I do. I used to think about it a lot. How it would look—her eyes, her mouth, the blood shooting out of her neck. Made me feel ~~so~~ good just thinking about it."



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 courage needed for street life. You had to find out where the public toilets were, she said; how to avoid Children's Services, police, how to escape drunks, dopeheads. But knowing where sleep is safe was the most important thing to learn. It took time but she had to learn what kinds of people will give you money and why, and remember 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 nuts. Anybody

could turn you in or hurt you. Whores 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, she confessed, and made her feel sick. She had been waiting on some steps at the Salvation Army truck stop when it began to rain. A lady on the truck 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 schoolgirls.

## RAIN

She's gone my black lady. That time I saw her stuck in the car her eyes scared me at first. But I really like her a lot. She's so pretty. Sometimes I used to just look at her when she was asleep. Today her 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

and 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 when I was thrown out. My black lady listens to me tell how it was. Steve won't let me talk about it. Neither will 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 he is because he didn't live in my mother's house. Steve is always here unless he's doing some day work somewhere. My black lady is tough but nice too. When we started walking back home after I told her everything about my life before Evelyn and Steve 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 in front of my face. The birdshot messed up her hand and wrist. 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 of her hand and arm, saying he was going to warn Regis' father. Evelyn washed the blood off my black lady's 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 self in danger to save me. My life. But that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it.

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

I miss my black lady.

*three*  
PART TWO

~~CHAPTER FOUR~~

Blood stained his knuckles and his hand began to swell. The stranger he'd been beating wasn't moving anymore or moaning, but he thought he'd better walk away quickly before a student or campus guard thought he was the lawless one instead of the man lying on the gravel. He'd left the beaten man's jeans open and his penis exposed



just the way it was when he first saw him at the edge of the campus playground. Only a few faculty children were near the slide and one was on the swing. None apparently had noticed the man licking his lips and waving his little white bone 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 the children was as pleasurable to the man as touching them because just as obviously, in his warped mind, they were calling to him and he was answering their plump thighs and their tight little behinds beckoning in panties or jeans 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 sweat 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 lecture hall 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, other than

himself, took a notebook out. He preferred pencil on paper but his swollen fingers made writing difficult. So he listened a little, day dreamed a little and covered his mouth to hide his yawns.

The professor was going on and on about Adam Smith's wrong headedness 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 chameleon Karl Marx? Booker's obsession with Mammon was recent. Four years ago as an undergraduate he'd nibbled courses in several curricula: psychology, political science, humanities and taken multiple courses in African American studies where the best professors were brilliant at description but could not answer to his satisfaction any question beginning with 'why'. He suspected most of the real answers concerning slavery, lynching, forced labor, share cropping, racism, reconstruction, Jim Crow, prison labor, migration, civil rights and black revolution movements were all about money. White hatred, white violence was the gasoline that kept the money motors running. So as a graduate student he turned to the <sup>its history, its theories</sup> 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 habitually contrasted the beaten, penniless, half-naked King of the Jews screaming betrayal on a cross with the bejeweled, glamorously dressed Pope whispering homilies above the Vatican's vault.

Unimpressed by the lecture, his thoughts slid toward the man lying exposed near the playground. Bald. 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 a disease-carrying insect but could happily swallow the life of a child?

Booker had been raised in a large, tight family with no television in sight. As a freshman 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 full of <sup>entertainment</sup> information but 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 the screen sounds of games blasting from every dorm room, lounge and student friendly bar. He knew he was way, way 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 paper. Every Saturday morning, first thing, his parents held conferences with their children requiring them 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? Over the years 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 acne <sup>is back</sup> ~~went go away~~", "My stomach hurts", "The conjugation of Latin verbs." Questions 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 weekend—his mother's huge breakfast feasts. Banquets really. Hot



biscuits, short and flakey; grits snow white and tongue-burning hot; eggs beaten into pale orange creaminess; sizzling sausage patties, sliced tomatoes, strawberry jam, freshly squeezed orange juice, cold milk in mason jars. Some food she stored up for those weekend feasts because <sup>during</sup> the rest of the week they ate frugally: oatmeal, in season fruit, rice, dried beans and whatever green leaf was available: kale, spinach, cabbage, collards, mustard or turnip greens. Those weekend breakfast menus were deliberately sumptuous because they followed days of scarcity.

Only during the eight months when no one knew where Adam was did the family conferences and excessive breakfasts stop. Then quiet ticked through the house like a time bomb. Quarrels, silly and pointlessly mean, intensified.

"Ma, he's looking at me!"

"Stop looking at her."

"He's looking back!"

"Stop looking back,"

"Ma!"

Booker's father refused to play even one of his beloved ragtime, old time, jazzy 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.

Booker went with his father to identify the remains. Filthy, rat-gnawed with a single open eye-socket. The maggots, overfed and bursting with glee had gone home leaving fastidiously clean bones under his mud-caked yellow t shirt. The corpse wore no pants or shoes. Booker's mother could not go there. She refused to have etched in her brain anything other than her image of her firstborn's 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 dish after dish of cooked food delivered to their kitchen. The very excess made him lonelier. It was as though his older brother, close as a twin, was being buried again, suffocating under



song, sermon, tears, crowds and flowers. He wanted to <sup>un-do</sup> ~~re-dress~~ the mourning—make it private, special and, most of all his alone. Adam was the brother he worshipped, two years older and sweet as cane. A flawless replacement for the brother he'd curled up with in the womb. A brother, he was told, who didn't take a single living breath. Booker was three when they let him know he was a twin to the one who did not survive birth, but somehow he'd always known it—felt the warm void walking by his side, or waiting on the porch steps while he played in the yard. A presence that shared the quilt while Booker slept. As he grew older the shape of the void faded, transferred itself into a kind of inner companion, one whose reactions and instincts he trusted. When he started first grade and walked to school every day with Adam the replacement was complete. So, following Adam's murder, Booker had no companion. Both were dead.

The last time Booker saw Adam 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 aggressively alive in the process of setting. Down the

sidewalk between hedges and towering trees Adam floated, a spot 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 the one who knew what Booker was thinking, feeling, whose humor was both raucous and instructive but never cruel, the smartest one who loved each of his siblings but especially Booker.

Unable to forget that final glow of yellow tunneling down the street, Booker placed a single yellow rose on the coffin lid and another, later, graveside. Family members came long distances to <sup>bury</sup> commemorate the dead and comfort the Starberns. Among them was Mr. Drew, his mother's father. He was the successful one, the grandfather openly hostile to everybody not as rich as he was, the one even his daughter called, not Daddy but Mr. Drew. Yet the old man minded what was left of his manners and did not show the contempt he felt for this struggling family.



After the funeral the house returned to its routine with the background sounds of Louis, Etta, 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 whole family perked up like Sesame Seed puppets hoping that cheer, if worked at hard enough, could sugar the living and quiet the dead. Booker thought their joking strained and their made up problems both misguided and insulting. One visiting relative, an aunt they called Queen, was the exception. She had a last name that no one remembered since she was rumored to have had many husbands—one a Mexican, then two white men, four black men, one Asian but in a sequence no one recalled. Heavy set with fire red hair, she surprised the grieving family by traveling all the way from California to attend Adam's funeral. She alone sensed her nephew's anger mixed sorrow and pulled him aside.

"Don't let him go," she said. "Not until he's ready. Meantime, hang on to him tooth and nail. Adam will let you know when it's time."

She comforted him, strengthened him and validated the  
censure he was feeling from his family.

*unfairness of the*

Wary 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. Sure, said Mr. Starbern, provided his son earned half the teacher's fee. With relief Booker skipped the Saturday conferences for trumpet lessons that dampened his budding intolerance for his siblings. How could they pretend it was over? How could they forget and just go on? Who and where was the murderer?

His trumpet teacher, already slightly drunk early in the morning, was nevertheless an excellent musician and an even better instructor.

"You got the lungs, the fingers, now you need the lip. When you get all three together you can forget about them and let the music out."

Which, with persistence, he did.



Six years later when Booker was fourteen and a faintly accomplished trumpet player the nicest man in the world was caught, tried and convicted of SSS, the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys, each of whose names, including Adam's, was tattooed across the shoulders of the nicest man in the world. Boise. Lenny. Adam. *Clearly an equal opportunity slayer* Matthew. Kevin. Roland. The tattoo artist said he thought they were the names of his client's children, not <sup>of</sup> other people's.

The nicest man in the world was an easy-going retired auto 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. <sup>\*</sup>“Dirt,” he used to say. “Most machinery died because it was never cleaned.” Everyone who had hired him recalled 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 traveled with a cute little dog in his van, a terrier he called ‘Boy.’ The police withheld what details they could but the families of the murdered six could not be stopped. Nightmares about what might have been done to their children did not outweigh the

*and ancient gas stoves.*

facts. Six years of grief and unanswered questions coalesced around their recollections of time spent in the morgue, heaving, weeping, stone-faced or on their backs in helpless faints.

There was not much left of Adam when he was found, but the details of the more recent abductions were <sup>Gothic</sup> ~~Barbaric~~. The children were kept bound while molested and tortured and there were amputations. The nicest man in the world probably used the small terrier as a lure. A central witness, an elderly neighbor, remembered that she had seen a child in the passenger side of his van laughing and holding a little dog up to his face. Later, after <sup>seeing</sup> missing child posters ~~were~~ <sup>\*</sup> ~~displayed everywhere~~, she called the police. Of course they knew the van. It sported in red and blue its promise:

PROBLEM? SOLVED! WM. V. HUMBOLDT. HOME REPAIR.

When Humboldt's house was searched a ~~double bed~~ <sup>mattress sporting dried blood</sup> was found in the basement along with an elaborately painted candy tin that held carefully wrapped pieces of dry flesh, which, on not very close inspection, turned out to be small penises.

Public demands and cries for blood disguised as justice were rampant. Booker joined the chorus but was not impressed by so

\* in store windows, and on telephone poles and trees



facile a solution. What he wanted was not the man's death; he wanted his life and spent time inventing scenarios involving pain and despair without end. The rage, the public clamor upon the arrest and conviction of the nicest man in the world shook him almost as much as Adam's death. The trial was not long but seemed eternal to Booker. Throughout the days of newspaper headlines, radio and gossip he struggled to find some way to freeze and individualize his feelings, to separate them from the <sup>frenzied</sup> mourning ~~and rage~~ of other families. Adam's calamity, he thought, was not public fare, or one line in a newspaper's list of the six victims. It was private belonging only to the two brothers. A year later, just before he entered college, a satisfactory solution came to him. 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 <sup>on</sup> for the predator? <sup>1 flesh</sup> He didn't ask. The tattoo artist didn't have the dazzling yellow of Booker's memory, so they settled for an orange-ish kind of red.

Being accepted into college offered relief and he soon became enchanted with campus life, not the classes or the professors, but

with his lively, know-it-all classmates, an enchantment that did not wane for two years. All he did from freshman year through sophomore was react—sneer, laugh, dismiss, find fault, demean—a young man's version of critical thinking. He and his dorm mates ranked girls according to pop magazines and porn videos, ranked each other according to <sup>characters in</sup> action movies they had seen. The clever ones breezed through classes; the geniuses dropped out. It was as a junior that his mild cynicism morphed into depression. The views of his classmates began to both bore and bother him, not only because they were predictable but also because they blocked serious inquiry. Unlike his effort to perfect "Wild Cat Blues" on his trumpet, no new or creative thinking was required in undergraduate society and none penetrated the blessed fog of young transgression. When sarcasm fluttered its triumphant flag and giggles became its oath, when the docile manipulation of professors became routine, Booker re-played 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.



So, hoping to learn something of value and perhaps find an accommodating place for despair, he applied to graduate school. There he focused on tracking the wealth of nations from barter to bombs. To him it was a riveting intellectual journey that contained his anger, caged it. The political world was anathema; its activists, both retro and progressive seemed wrong-headed and dreamy. <sup>Wealth</sup> ~~Money~~ alone explained humanity's evil and he was determined to live without deference to it. Other than <sup>the</sup> ~~economic~~ <sup>of economists and historians</sup> scholarship he read a little poetry and some journals. No novels—great or lesser. He liked certain poems because they paralleled music; <sup>a few</sup> journals because the essays bled politics into culture. It was during his graduate school days that he began to write, trying to shape unpunctuated sentences into musical language that expressed his questions about or results of his thinking. Most of these he trashed; a few he kept.

Assured finally of his Master's Degree, Booker traveled home alone for the celebratory dinner his mother had arranged. He thought about asking Felicity, his on again, off again girlfriend to accompany him, but decided against it. He didn't want <sup>a stranger</sup> ~~company~~ judging his family. That was his job.

Everything was smooth and cheerful at the family gathering until he went upstairs to his old bedroom, the one he shared with Adam. Looking for what he was not sure. The room was not simply different; it was antagonistic—a double bed instead of his and Adam's twin set, white transparent curtains instead of shades, a cutesy rug under a tiny desk. Worst of all, the closet that used to be jammed with their playthings: bats, basketballs, board games now held girl clothes. But his resentment caught fire when he discovered that his old skateboard, identical to the one that disappeared along with Adam, was gone. Weak with sadness, Booker went back downstairs. But when he saw his sister, his pallid weakness changed into its blazing white twin—fury. He picked a quarrel with Carole; she argued back. Their fight escalated and disturbed the whole family. Mr. Starbern shut it down.

"You not the only one grieving. Folks grieve in different ways," he said.

"Yeah, sure." Booker's tone was hostile, laced with contempt.



"You acting like you the only one loved him. Adam wouldn't want that," said his father.

"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 whispered.

Father and son stared at one another their eyes locking in military aggression. Mr. Starbern won the battle and Booker left the house, closing the door softly behind him.

<sup>perhaps</sup>  
<sup>It was</sup> Fitting that after leaving the only home he had ever known he would step out into a downpour. Rain forced him to raise his collar and duck his head like a thief in the night. Shoulders high, eyes squinting he moved down Decatur Street in a mood the rain complemented. Before his quarrel with Carole he'd tried to persuade his parents to think of some sort of memorial for Adam--a modest scholarship in his name, for example. His mother warmed to the idea, but his father frowned and was decidedly against it.

"We can't waste money like that and we can't waste time raising it," he said. "Besides, the people who admired and remembered Adam already did love and remember him and don't need to be reminded."

Booker felt a thin vein of disapproval not only from Carole, but <sup>his</sup> the younger siblings as well. To Favor and Goodman it seemed Booker wanted a statue of a brother who died when they were babies. What Booker understood as family loyalty, the others saw as manipulation—as trying to control them—out-fathering their father. Just because he had two college degrees he thought he could tell everybody what to do. They rolled their eyes at his arrogance.

Visiting his and Adam's old bedroom, the thread of disapproval he'd felt during his proposal of a memorial became a rope as he saw the <sup>savage</sup> gothic absence not only of Adam but himself. So when he shut the door on his family and stepped out into the rain it was an already belated act.



Felicity said OK, sure, when Booker asked if he could bunk at her place for a while. He was grateful to her since he had no address of his own once he cleared out of the graduate dorm. On the bus back to campus reading the back issue of *Daedalus* he'd brought along distracted him from currying his anger at his family. But it surfaced powerfully as he threw the remnants of his college life into boxes—texts, running shoes, notebooks, journals—all except his loved trumpet. Felicity was a substitute teacher and their relationship had lasted two years primarily because there were sustained blocks of time when they did not see each other. Her call-ups, based as they were on the illness of a permanent teacher, were irregular and often to distant districts. So he felt comfortable asking whether he could move in for a bit since both knew it had nothing to do with commitment. It was summer and since Felicity would have no requests for substituting they could enjoy each other's company without deadlines: go to movies, eat out, run trails—whatever they felt like.

One evening Booker took Felicity to Pier 2; a run-down dinner and dancing club that boasted a live combo. Over the shrimp and

rice Booker thought, as he often did, that the quartet on the little stage needed brass. Almost all popular music was saturated with strings: guitars, basses and piano keys aided by percussion. Other than the big star musicians like the E Street Band, groups seldom featured, in back up or solo, a sax, clarinet, trombone or trumpet and he felt the void intensely. So this evening at the break he went backstage to the narrow dressing room full of weed smoke and laughing musicians to ask if he could join their group sometime. Not wanting to cut their earnings with another player they dismissed him quickly.

"Go to hell, man."

"Well you could at least hear me," he pleaded. "I play trumpet and you could do with a horn."

The guitarists rolled their eyes, but the pianist said, "Bring it to the Friday set. That's when it won't matter if you screw up."

He did just that, trying out before them in the dressing room with as close as he could come to a Miles Davis piece. The drummer nodded, the piano player smiled and the two guitars had no objection. From then on during the summer Booker joined the group calling itself



The Big Boys on Fridays when the place was so crowded the dancers and diners paid no attention to the music.

When in September The Big boys broke up—the drummer moved away; the piano player got a bigger better gig—Booker and the guitarists began to play on the streets. It was the sweetest part of his life because by the end of summer the relationship with Felicity had frayed beyond any stitching up remedy. They had enjoyed being roommate/lovers the whole summer before each began to annoy the other with habits they had not previously paid close attention to.

Felicity complained about his loud trumpet practice and his refusal to party every single night with her friends. He hated her cigarette smoke, her choices of take-out food, music tapes and wine. In addition to constant visits from members of her family, she was nosy, forever prying into his life. In fact Felicity found him as unpleasant and annoying as he found her. Nevertheless they might have stayed together in spite of the mutual hostility that was surfacing between them except for one event. Booker's arrest and the night he spent in a holding cell.

He had passed a couple, parked in an empty lot, smoking crack. The sight was of no interest to him until he noticed a child, maybe two years old, crying while standing in the back seat of their Toyota. He walked over to it, yanked open the door and dragged the man out, smashed his face and kicked away the pipe that had fallen to the ground. Then the woman jumped out and ran to help her partner. The three-person fight was more hilarious than lethal, but it got police attention fairly soon. All three were arrested and the little girl given to childcare services.

Felicity had to pay the fine. The judge was lenient with Booker because the crack head parents disgusted him as much as it did Booker. He arraigned the couple and issued a disturbing the peace ticket for Booker. That incident enraged Felicity who wondered aloud why he meddled in things that did not concern him.

"Who do you think you are? Batman?"

Booker fingered his right molar to see if it was loose or broken. The female had had more strength than the man who swung wildly but never connected.



"There was a little kid in that car. A baby!" he said.

"It wasn't your kid and it wasn't your business," answered  
Felicity.

A mite loose decided Booker but he would see a dentist  
anyway.

On the bus home each knew it was over without saying so.  
Felicity continued nagging for an hour or so after they arrived at her  
apartment, but up against Booker's stony silence, she quit and took a  
shower. He did not join her, as had been their practice.

Booker's work history was thin—one disaster-ridden semester  
teaching music in a junior high school, the only public school teaching  
he could do since he had no certificate, and he was cut from the few  
music auditions he signed up for. His trumpet talent was adequate  
but not exceptional. His luck changed at the precise moment it  
needed to when Carole tracked him down to pass along a letter from  
a law firm. Mr. Drew had included his grandchildren in his will and  
Booker was to share the old man's constantly bragged-about fortune  
with his siblings. Not bad. Now he could rent his own place and

continue playing either on the street or in other little rundown clubs.

Having access to no studio, the men played on corners certain weekends. Not for money, which was pitiful enough, but to practice and experiment with each other in public before a non-paying, therefore un-critical, undemanding audience.

Then came a day that changed him and his music.

Simply dumbstruck by her beauty Booker stared open-mouthed. A young, blue-black woman laughing, tucking 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 two guitarists—Michael and Freeman Chase. No one was there, not Michael, or Chase, 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 baby-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 fall leaves seemed to preen 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 he imagined her eyes glittering toward him or her lips open in an inviting, reckless smile, he felt not just a swell of desire 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 of her waiting for a limousine there she was again, standing in line at the stadium where the Black Gauchos were performing—a hot band, new,

*a combination of*  
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 four 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, circling her waist with his arms seemed more than a natural gesture; it was an inevitable one. And they danced and danced. When the music stopped his Galatea turned to face him and surrender unto him the reckless smile he'd always imagined.

"Bride," she said when he asked her name.

God damn, he thought.

Their lovemaking was serene and long lasting, so necessary to Booker that he 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 with Felicity there was no



probing. Bride's self-love was consistent with her cosmetic company milieu and mirrored his fascination with her. So if she rattled on about co-workers, products and markets he watched her mesmerizing eyes, so deeply expressive they said much more than her words. Speaking eyes, he thought, accompanied by 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. Yet dancing with her in down lit club rooms to Michael Jackson's soprano or James Brown's shouts was irresistible. 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 in anticipation with certainty of what they could do between the sheets. Sober as priests, creative as devils, they invented sex. So they believed.

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 mediocre collection that so moved him he composed some sentimental 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 the fairy tale castle collapsed and Booker ran away.

A city girl is often amused by the cardboard boredom of tiny country towns. Whatever the weather, <sup>staid</sup> iron bright sunshine or piercing rain, the impression of worn boxes hiding shiftlessness seemed to sap everything. It's one thing for one-time hippies to live their anti-capitalist ideals near the edge of a seldom traveled country road. Evelyn and Steve had lived lives of excitement in their adventurous pasts. But what about regular plain folks who were born in these places and never left? Bride wasn't feeling superior to the line of trailers on each side of the road just puzzled. What would make Booker choose this place? And who the hell is Q. Olive?

Four  
~~CHAPTER THREE~~

A city girl is often amused by the cardboard boredom of tiny country towns. Whatever the weather, <sup>steel</sup> ~~iron~~ bright sunshine or piercing rain, the impression of worn boxes hiding shiftlessness seemed to sap everything. It's one thing for one-time hippies to live their anti-capitalist ideals near the edge of a seldom traveled country road. Evelyn and Steve had lived lives of excitement in their adventurous pasts. But what about regular plain folks who were born in these places and never left? Bride wasn't feeling superior to the line of trailers on each side of the road just puzzled. What would make Booker choose this place? And who the hell is Q. Olive?



Seventy miles of roads that must have been created by deer and wolves. Truckers could navigate them but a Jaguar repaired with another model's part had serious trouble. Bride drove carefully, peering ahead for obstacles alive or not. By the time she saw the sign nailed to the trunk of a pine tree, her exhaustion quieted a growing alarm. Although there were no more physical disappearances, she was disturbed by the fact that she'd had no menstrual period for at least two months. Flat-chested without underarm or pubic hair, minus pierced ears, she tried and failed to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation into a stupid little girl.

Whiskey, it turned out, was a dozen or so houses on both sides of a gravel road that led to a village of trailers. The houses had no addresses but some trailers had names painted on sturdy mailboxes. Under eyes suspicious of strange cars and stranger visitors, Bride cruised slowly

until she saw "Queen Olive" printed on a mailbox in front of a pale 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 heavy <sup>set</sup> red headed woman sprinkling gasoline on a metal bedspring, carefully noting where flames needed to be fed.

Bride hurried back to her car and waited. Two children came to look at her, one picking her nose, the other covering her mouth in fear. Bride ignored them. She knew well what it was to walk into a room and see the exchange of looks between white strangers. It was dismissible because the gasp her blackness caused was invariably followed by the shock her beauty produced. Besides she flat out refused to be distracted simply because she was outside the <sup>comfort</sup> zone of paved streets, tight lawns



surrounded by people who might not help but would not harm her. Determined to confront her enemy—and herself—there could be no retreat, no turning back.

Half an hour passed until a nickel-plated sun was at the top of the sky warming the car's interior.

Taking a deep breath Bride walked to the trailer's door and knocked. When the female arsonist appeared she said, "Hello. Excuse me. I'm looking for Booker Starbern. This the address I have for him."

"That figures," said the woman. "I get a lot of his mail—magazines, catalogues, even some writings he used to send me."

"Is he here?"

"Uh uh." The woman did not take her eyes from Bride's face. "He's nearby though."

*Bride stared at the*  
 "How far is nearby?" ~~More driving~~ wondered Bride?  
*woman's earrings - clam shells of gold.*

"You can walk it, but come on in. Booker ain't going nowhere. He's laid up; broke his arm. Come on in. You look like something a raccoon found and refused to eat."

Bride swallowed. For the past five years she'd only been told how strangely pretty she was—everywhere from everybody—stunning, dreamy, hot, wow! Now this old woman with wooly red hair and judging eyes had deleted an entire vocabulary 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, girl. You need feeding."

"Look, Miss Olive..."



"Just Queen, honey. <sup>\*</sup> Step on in. I don't get much company and I know hungry when I see it."

Well, that's true, thought Bride. Her anxiety during the night's long trip masked her stomach-yelling hunger. She obeyed Queen and was pleasantly surprised at the trailer's orderliness, comfort and charm. She had suspected she was being seduced into a witch's den. Obviously Queen sewed knitted, crocheted and made lace. Curtains, slipcovers, cushions, embroidered napkins were elegantly handmade. A quilt on the headboard of an empty bed, whose springs were apparently cooling outside, was pieced in soft colors like everything else, cleverly miss-matched. Small antiques such as picture frames and side tables were oddly placed. One whole wall was covered with photographs of children. A pot simmered on the two-burner stove. Queen, unaccustomed to being rebuffed, placed two porcelain bowls on linen

*\* and it's  
O is way  
not ALIVE*

mats along with matching napkins and silver soup spoons with filigreed handles.

Bride sat down at a narrow table on a chair with a decorative seat cushion 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 strong seasonings—curry? Cardamom? Garlic? Cayenne? Black pepper and red? But the result was manna. Queen added a basket of warm flat bread, joined her guest and blessed the food. Neither spoke for long minutes of eating. Finally, Bride asked, "Why were you burning your bedsprings? I saw you back there."

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



"Oh. I never heard of that." Then, feeling more comfortable with her host, asked, "What kind of stuff did Booker send you? You said he sent some writings."

"He did. Every now and then."

"What were they?"

"Beats me. I'll show you some, if you like. Say, why you looking for Booker? You sure can't be his girl friend. You sound like you don't know him too good."

"I don't, but I thought I did." She didn't say it, but she suddenly realized good sex was not knowledge.

Bride touched the napkin to her lips. "He dumped me. All of a sudden he left me without a word."

Queen chuckled. "Oh he's a leaver alright. Left his own family. All except me."

"Did he? Why?" Bride didn't like being classified with Booker's family, but the news surprised her.

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

"Awww," Bride moaned. "That really is sad."

"More than sad. Almost ruined the family."

"How did they respond?"

"Normal. They moved on. Started to live life like it was life. He wanted them to establish a memorial, a 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." She was laughing, her chest heaving, "So many men and all of them the same where it counts."

"Where does it count?"

"Ownership."

All those men and still all alone, thought Bride. "Don't you have any kids?" Obviously she did; their photographs were everywhere.

"Lots. Two live with their fathers and their new wives; two in the military—one a marine, one in the air force; another one, my last, a daughter is in medical school. She's my dream child. The next to last is filthy

rich somewhere in New York City. 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 gazing out from exquisite frames. "And I know how and what they think. Booker stays in touch with me, 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 removed a thin sheaf of papers clipped together and handed it to her guest.

What lovely handwriting, thought Bride, suddenly realizing that she'd never seen anything Booker wrote—*uncomfortable*. There were seven sheets. One 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 SANDS  
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 DO BELONG FINALLY TO THE PLANET YOU  
WERE BORN ON AND CAN NOW 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 SCAPES THE BONE NEVER  
TOUCHING THE MARROW WHERE THAT DIRTY  
FEELING IS THRUMMING LIKE A FIDDLE FOR  
FEAR ITS STRINGS WILL BREAK AND SCREECH

THE LOSS OF ITS TUNE SINCE FOR HER  
PERMANENT IGNORANCE IS SO MUCH BETTER  
THAN THE QUICK OF LIFE.

Reading the third page, she thought she remembered  
a conversation they'd had that could have provoked what  
he wrote. The one in which she described the landlord  
and details of her childhood.

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



IT TEARS INTO RAGS THE SILENCE TO EXPOSE  
 YOUR BEAUTY TOO DAZZLING TO CONTAIN AND  
 WHICH TURNS ITS MELODY INTO THE GRACE OF  
 LIV TRYING TO UNDERSTAND RACIST  
 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 THIS MOST FACILE OF HUMAN FEELINGS OF  
 INFERIORITY AND FLAW SIMPLY TO DISGUISE  
 THEIR OWN COWARDICE BY PRETENDING IT IS  
 IDENTICAL TO A BANJO'S PURITY.

THANK YOU. YOU SHOWED ME RAGE AND  
 FRAILTY AND HOSTILE RECKLESSNESS AND  
 WORRY WORRY WORRY DAPPLED WITH SUCH  
 UNCOMPROMISING SHARDS OF LIGHT AND LOVE  
 IT SEEMED A KINDNESS IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO  
 LEAVE YOU AND NOT FOLD INTO A GRIEF SO DEEP  
 IT WOULD BREAK NOT THE HEART BUT THE MIND  
 THAT KNOWS THE OBOE'S SHRIEK AND THE WAY

IT TEARS INTO RAGS THE SILENCE TO EXPOSE  
YOUR BEAUTY TOO DAZZLING TO CONTAIN AND  
WHICH TURNS ITS MELODY INTO THE GRACE OF  
LIVABLE SPACE.

Puzzled, Bride raised her eyes from the pages and  
looked at Queen, who said, "Interesting, yes?"

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

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

"No," murmured Bride. "These are about me, our  
time together." Then she read the last page.

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



Bride put the papers down and covered her eyes.

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

"I'm not sure I should, now." Bride shook her head. She had counted on her looks for so long, how well it <sup>beauty</sup> worked, she had not known its shallowness or her cowardice—the vital lesson Dearest taught and nailed to her spine.

"What's the matter with you?" Queen sounded annoyed. "You come all this way and just turn around and leave?" Then she started singing, imitating the voice of a baby:

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

"Damn!" Bride slapped the table. "You are absolutely right. This is about me, not him. Me!"

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

"Hell, no. I'm not leaving here until you..."

"I said get out! Now!" Booker's eyes were both dead and alive with hatred. His uncast arm pointed toward the door. Bride ran nine 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 fell back on his bed motionless. Tightening her fist on the broken neck 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 from the left side of his face 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 tell me why you bought presents for a child molester—in prison for it, for Christ's sake. Tell me why you forgave a monster."

"I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that. I wanted to make amends but she beat the shit out of me and I deserved it."

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

"You lied? What the hell for?"

"So my mother would hold my hand!"

"What?"

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



"So, did she?"

"Yes. She even liked me."

"So you mean to tell me..."

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

"Oh, God." Booker sighed. "Look. My brother, he was murdered by a freak, a predator like the one I thought you..."

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

"Alright! Alright! I get that but..."

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

Queen didn't knock; she simply opened the door to Booker's trailer and stepped in. When she saw Bride asleep in a chair and the bruise over Booker's eye she said, "What happened?"

"Dust up," said Booker.



"Is she alright?"

"Yeah. Knocked herself out and fell asleep."

"Some 'dust up.' She came all this way to beat you up? For what? Love or misery?"

"Both."

"Well, let's get her out of that chair and on the bed,"  
said Queen.

"Right." Booker moved over to the <sup>chair</sup>cot and with Queen's help they got her on his narrow un-made bed. Bride moaned, but did not wake.

Queen sat down at the table. "What you gonna do about her?"

"I don't know," answered Booker. "It was perfect for a while, the two of us."

"What caused the split?"

*Lies*

"~~Miscommunication~~. Just not saying what was true."

"About?"

"About children. Us as children, why we did things, took actions that were really about what went on when we were kids."

"Adam for you?"

"Adam for me."

"And for her?"

"A big lie she told when she was a kid that put an innocent woman in prison. A long sentence for child abuse the woman never did. We quarreled about Bride's sympathy for the woman."

"Why did she lie?"

"To get some love—from her mama."



"Lord! What a mess. And you thought about Adam—again. Always Adam."

"Yep."

Queen crossed her wrists and leaned on the table.

"How long is he going to run you?"

"I can't help it, Queen."

"No? She told her truth; what's yours?"

Booker didn't answer. The two of them sat in silence with Bride's light snoring the only sound until Queen said, "You need a noble reason to fail, don't you. Or some really deep reason to feel superior?"

"Aw, no, Queen. I'm not like that!"

"Well what? You tie Adam to your back so he can work day and night to fill your brain. Don't you think he's

tired? He must be wore out having to die and get no rest because he has to run somebody else's life."

"Adam's not managing me."

"No. You managing him. Did you ever feel free of him? Ever?"

"Well." Booker flashed back to standing in the rain, how his music changed right after he saw Bride stepping into a limousine. He thought about his arms around her waist and her smile when she turned around. "Well," he said. "It was good, really good with her for a while." He couldn't hide a smile.

"I guess good isn't good enough for you so you called Adam back and made your brother's murder your excuse."

Booker stared at Queen for a long time until she stood up and left. *\* him hunched in his chair.*

*\* Not even  
hiding her  
disappointment*



Sat on the step

I don't know anything about  
love. Dovee's right. Except for  
Adam

Birde probably knows more about it  
than I do. At least she's willing  
to figure it out, <sup>do something</sup> risk something,

to ~~know~~ take its measure.  
sit on a throne

I risk nothing, I stay in a cocoon

~~Charmed by my intelligence~~  
~~the moral positions I have~~  
~~self-determination~~ <sup>taken</sup>  
insolence  
that goes  
along with  
them.

I write notes about them  
Keenly aware of the  
shortcomings of others.

~~Write something~~

See new text  
on computer  
revision on

Bride woke in sunshine from a dreamless sleep—deeper than drunkenness, deeper than any she had known. Not having slept in fourteen hours she felt more than rested and free of tension. Having confessed to Lula Ann's deception 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. Besides what we see when we look at them is no longer there. <sup>they were</sup> Dead thousands of years ago and we just got the news."

MTK

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

"A letter came for you. An overdue bill, I mean, from a music repair shop. Sally's Pawn Palace. So I went there."



Queen doesn't think so.

"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. <sup>\*</sup> Anyway I brought you your horn. Is there more coffee?"

"You got it? My trumpet?"

"Of course. It's fixed too, <sup>they said.</sup> ~~I~~ guess."

"Where is it? At Queen's?"

"In the trunk of my car."

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

\* I have to say  
but it did feel good.

275-<sup>00</sup>  
payable



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.

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 thin red lick of ~~flame~~<sup>flame</sup>, 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~~<sup>steps</sup>. Finally there was the joy of sucking delicious embroidered fabric of lace, of silk, of velvet.

By the time Bride and Booker got there, a small cluster of people was standing in front of Queen's trailer—

the jobless, several children and the elderly. Smoke was sneaking from the sills and the door saddle when they broke in. First Booker, then Bride right behind him.

They 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 pull the unconscious woman to the floor and drag her out to the front lawn.

"Further! Come on, further!" shouted one of the men standing there. "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 hair 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 <sup>spitting</sup> ~~vomiting~~, a major sign of life. As the ambulance parked, the crowd became bigger <sup>and</sup> some of the on-lookers seemed transfixed—but not at the patient now 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. But it was hard to ~~do and~~ <sup>\*</sup> she was slightly ashamed at dividing her attention from the sad sight of Queen's slide into the back

*\* Suppress her happiness, although.*

of the ambulance to the thrilling return of her flawless breasts.

Once Queen was admitted, Bride spent the days with her, Booker the nights, three of which passed before Queen opened her eyes. Head bandaged, its contents drugged, she recognized neither of her rescuers. All they were able to do was watch the tubes, <sup>attached to the patient</sup> one clear as glass turning like a rainforest vine, others thin as telephone wire, all secondary to the white clematis bloom covering the soft gurgle from her lips.

A Line of primary colors bled across screens above the hospital bed. ~~On occasion a nurse inserted a syringe needle into the transparent vine feeding~~ Queen's flaccid arm. Too weak to rise to a bed pan, she had to be scoured, oiled and re-wrapped—all of which Bride, not trusting the indifferent hands of the nurse, did herself as tenderly as



2 Translucent bags hung on poles  
dripping champagne colored  
liquor into

OK with  
G.V.

possible. And she bathed her one section at a time making sure the lady's body was covered in the areas already cleansed. She left Queen's feet untouched because in the evening when Booker relieved her he insisted on assuming that care. He maintained the pedicure, soaped then rinsed Queen's feet, finally massaging them slowly, rhythmically with a lotion that smelled like heather. He did the same for Queen's hands.

Sitting in a hospital waiting room with nothing to do but worry was an ordeal. But so was staring helplessly at the patient noting every <sup>stir</sup> ~~blink~~, breath or shift of the prone body. After three days of waiting broken by what acts of comfort they could provide, Queen opened her eyes. <sup>Then</sup> When early one evening the oxygen mask was removed <sup>and</sup> Queen whispered, "Am I going to be all right?"

Booker smiled.



"No question. No question at all." He leaned in and kissed her nose.

Queen licked her dry lips, closed her eyes again and began to snore.

When Bride returned to relieve him and he told her what happened, they celebrated by eating breakfast together in the hospital cafeteria. Booker reached into his shirt pocket and took out the ~~pair of~~ gold earrings that ~~the doctor~~ <sup>been in order</sup> had removed to bandage Queen's head. All this time they had been lying in the drawer of the small table <sup>the hospital</sup> next to ~~Queen's~~ bed.

"Take these," he said. "She loved them and would want you to wear them, at least for now."

Bride touched her earlobes, felt the tiny holes and <sup>AND when she</sup> <sup>her eyes were bright with tears. →</sup> slipped the big gold hoops into her <sup>slipped easily</sup> magically re-opened ears.

See  
Giv. 10  
polite

"No question. No question at all." He leaned in and

kissed her nose.

Queen flicked her dry lips, closed her eyes again and

began to snore.

When Prince returned to tell his father, he told her

"Let me," said Booker and he  
~~clipped~~ <sup>inserted</sup> the big gold hoops easily  
 into Bride's earlobes.

the doctor had removed to change Queen's head. All this

time they had been lying in the drawer of the small table

next to Queen's bed.

was with a gram of meat to some purpose in the world.

"Take these," he said. "She loved them and would

want you to wear them, at least for now."

that is how she was wearing them.

Bride touched her earlobes, felt the tiny holes and

slipped the big gold hoops into her newly reopened



"I'm glad she was wearing them because nothing at all is left in the trailer. No letters, address book, nothing. All burned. So I asked my mother to get in touch with Queen's kids."

"Can she contact them?" asked Bride,

*rocking her head from side to side to enjoy the weight of the earrings.*

"Some," Booker replied. "A daughter in Texas,

medical student. She'll be easy to find."

*stopped playing with the earrings and*  
Bride stirred her coffee. "She told me she doesn't see any of them, but they send her money."

"They all hate her for some reason or another. I know she abandoned some of them to marry other men. Lots of other men <sup>she</sup> and didn't or couldn't take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that."

"I think she loves them <sup>h</sup> tough. Their photographs were all over the place."

*Yeah, well*  
 "They always are. The bastard who murdered my brother had all his victims' photos in his fucking den."

"Not the same, Booker."

"No?" He looked out the window.

"No. Queen loves her children."

"They don't think so."

"Come on," said Bride. She reached across the table and held his hand. "Let's go back and see how she's doing."

Standing on either side of Queen's bed, they were delighted to hear her speaking, and loudly.

"Hannah? Hannah?" Queen was staring at Bride and breathing hard. "Come here, baby. Hannah?"

"Who's Hannah?" asked Bride.

"Her daughter. The medical student."

\* If you mean they're not dead OK. But...



"She thinks I'm her daughter? God. Drugs, medicine, I guess. That stuff confuses her."

"Or focuses her," said Booker. "There was a thing with Hannah. Rumor in the family was that Queen ignored or dismissed the girl's complaint about her father—the Asian one I believe. <sup>\*</sup> She said he fondled her and Queen refused to believe it. The ice between them never melted."

"It's still on her mind."

"Deeper than her mind." Booker sat at the edge of Queen's bed listening to her persistent call—a whisper now—for Hannah. "Now I think of it, it explains why she told me to hang on to Adam, to keep him close."

"But Hannah isn't dead."

"In a way she is, at least to her mother. You saw that photo display she had in her trailer. Takes up all the

\* On the ~~Texan~~ <sup>TEXAN</sup>. I don't know. Anyway,

wall space. Most of them are of Hannah—as a baby, a teenager, a high school graduate, winning some prize.

*more*  
Like a memorial." *than a gallery.*

"I thought those pictures were of all her children"

"Some are. But Hannah reigns."

Following a couple days of cheer-inspiring recovery;

Queen *was* still confused but talking and eating. Her conversation was hard to follow since it seemed to consist of geography—the places she had lived in—and anecdotes addressed to Hannah.

*island*  
Suddenly, the colored lines on the screens began to wiggle and fall, their sliding punctuated by the music of emergency bells. Queen's blood count dropped as her temperature rose. A mysterious hospital borne virus ~~was~~ to blame.

*as sneaky and evil as the flame  
that destroyed her trailer <sup>was</sup> attacking the  
woman.*



Bride and Booker <sup>were pleased</sup> ~~with the~~  
 with the doctor's assessment - "She's  
 doing much better. Much." They relaxed  
 and began to plan what to do when  
 Queen was released. Get a place  
 where all three were together. At  
 least until Queen could take care  
 of herself. +

Their plans for the future  
~~collapsed suddenly~~  
 crumbled slowly, then  
 collapsed as ~~the~~

at together

Twelve hours later Queen was dead. Her eyes were still open, so Bride doubted the fact. It was Booker who closed them, after which he closed his own.

[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



During the  
Three days ~~they waited~~ until the ashes were  
~~turned~~ ready to be given to them, they  
picked over the choice of urn. Bride wanted  
something or wate, Booker wanted an  
environmentally friendly - When  
they realized there was no suitable grave  
the ashes were put into a cardboard  
box - to be carried to the river  
bank and strewn. Although heartfelt  
It was a pitiful ceremony: The  
ashes were lumpy and difficult to toss.

Booker's ~~musical~~ <sup>tribute</sup>  
~~at the riverside~~ <sup>out of tune and</sup>  
~~his trumpet playing~~ <sup>uninspired,</sup>  
He cut it short <sup>slowly walked back</sup>  
~~and~~ <sup>to the</sup>  
Car where Bride waited. ~~Believing~~

~~he had~~ <sup>resting his fore</sup>  
<sup>head in his hands,</sup>

And sat down on the grass <sup>talented</sup>  
\* What made him think he was a trumpet player.  
or that it <sup>performance</sup> could shield him, ~~because~~ his  
language of memory <sup>is a displacement of</sup>  
How long would the past ~~with handkerchiefs~~  
~~anchor~~ <sup>anchor him in the</sup>  
~~muddy~~ <sup>rip and</sup>  
<sup>wave of</sup>  
<sup>life.</sup>

~~crossed, head bowed. Bride waits in the car until he joins her]~~

The quiet is thick, suffocating because there are no tears. Finally Bride broke the silence that was too unbearable to maintain.

"I'm pregnant," she said quietly, her voice close to a whisper.

"What did you say?"

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

Booker gazed at her a long time before looking away toward the river where a smattering of Queen's ashes still floated. Then he turned back to Bride. "No," he said. "It's ours."



Queen's remains <sup>drifted</sup> <sup>drifted</sup> farther and farther  
down steam. The sky too sullen to keep its  
promise of ~~sunlight~~ <sup>sunlight</sup>, sent hot moisture  
instead.

Bride took Booker's hand and  
he threaded his fingers through hers.  
~~They~~ <sup>Leaning back on</sup> ~~the head rests~~  
~~and stared~~ <sup>they</sup> stared through the windshield  
at what might lay before them. No  
lonely wandering child passed by, but  
if one had he/she <sup>might</sup> ~~might~~ have  
noticed the slow smiles ~~on each of~~  
~~of the couple~~ <sup>and the how</sup> ~~of the couple~~ <sup>and the how</sup>  
~~of the couple~~ <sup>and the how</sup> ~~of the couple~~ <sup>and the how</sup>  
wide and soft their eyes. What  
might cause that shine of happiness?

and let their  
spines  
sink etc  
\* and glanced  
at the  
couple  
in the  
car

Tomorrow (Wed)  
12:00 KLS  
66 Leonard  
↓  
RR

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.

*insert (back of p. 178)*

A child. 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 vanity, cowardice, missing body parts and disappointing families.

They believe.

A child. New life. Innocent. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, molestation, bullets, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment, error. All goodness. Minus wrath.

So they believe.



modern love affair  
Bet "fly" black girl & "serious" black man  
How each grows up. She gets strength \*  
He takes responsibility \*\*  
Tending Q helps <sup>them</sup> make the transition

Bride's strange beauty  
is useless  
(except to  
defy mother)

without skin privileges

Booker's child hood  
trauma

\*  
No longer  
selfish &  
being a black  
beauty  
\*\* stops using  
dead brother  
as reason  
for idleness  
and arrogance

Shaving brush Pain  
I used it  
on my pitten