



"'Doubt it.' Booker placed a cup of coffee..."

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

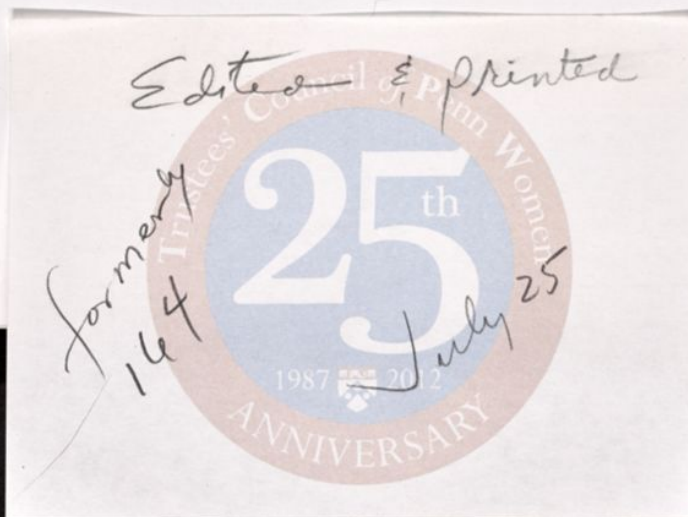
Bride blew away the coffee's steam. "She showed me the things you mailed her. Your writing. When I read them I knew they were all about me, right?"

"Yeah." Booker ^{Shook his head and ~~smiled~~ sighed} ~~burst into laughter~~. "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." ^{Right?}

"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?"



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her. "She's an original. Doesn't recognize crazy."

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the things you mailed her. Your writing. When I read

them I knew they were all about me, right?"

"Yeah," Booker burst into laughter. "Everything is

Why did you send them to Queen,
I don't know, Maybe I liked them
too much to hash and not enough
to carry around.

"You know what I did? I wrote her when we

were together."

"How many letters did you write?"

"They're just thoughts, Bride. Thoughts about what

I was feeling or feared or, most often, what I truly

believed—at the time."

"Just in case of your little secret?"

"You still believe heartbreak should burn like a

star?"

“I do. But stars can explode. Besides what we see
 when we look at them ^{may} ~~is~~ no longer there. Some died
 thousands of years ago and we just got the news.”

~~MTK~~

^{Speaking of information}
 “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.”

“Why?”

“To pay them, idiot. They told me where you were
 from. This ^{dump of a} ~~so-called~~ town, and they had a forwarding
 address to a Mrs. Q. Olive.”

“You drove all this way to slap my face?”

“Maybe. I didn’t plan it, but I have to say it did feel

"I do. But stars can explode. Besides what we see

when we look at them is no longer there. Some died

thousands of years ago and we just see the light."

"Not dead all around?"

"But, how did you find her, anyway?"

"A letter came for you. Answered it. I heard from

? Speaking of info.

on "lucky soul" boy and I. Situation now and in joy

"Why? Just ask the two men in the

"To pay them, idiot. They told me where you were

from. This happened town, and they had a forwarding

address to a Mrs. Q. Olive."

giving up, but all this was just a mistake, she said

and I was right. I was right. I was right. I was right.

I was right. I was right. I was right. I was right.

good. Anyway I brought you your horn. Is there more coffee?"

"You got it? My trumpet?"

"Of course. It's fixed too."

"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.

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, 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 ^{pair of} two back steps. ^{then the door - pine sweet and soft.} 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 ^{→ over some by smoke} crawled to the couch where Queen lay lifeless. With his one good arm and Bride's two, their eyes watering and

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lay still

Seduced by the smile of smoke
without heat

of sucking delicious embroidered fabric of lace, of silk, of

and ginnoved, small and sturdy, rich and new in quality

of bird of emit hugens ten—kind a in rich her to seem

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cranked 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 ^{lady} woman to the floor and drag her out to the ^{tiny} 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 ^{blistering} ~~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 spitting, a major sign ^s of life. As the

ambulance parked, the crowd became bigger and 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 suppress her happiness, although she was slightly ashamed at ~~dividing~~ ^{diverting} her attention ~~from~~ ^{between} the sad sight of Queen's slide into the back 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 attached to the

patient, 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.

^{Lines}
~~A line~~ of primary colors bled across ^{the} screens above the
 hospital bed. Transparent bags of what looked like ^{flat}
 champagne dripped into a vine feeding Queen's flaccid
 arm. ^{Unable} ~~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
 possible. And she bathed her one section at a time
 making sure the lady's body was covered in ^{certain} ~~the~~ areas
^{before and after cleansing.}
~~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.



The Silence

Neither one spoke during those ablutions and, except for Bride's occasional humming, the quiet became the balm they needed.

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 stir, 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. Then ~~early~~^{late} one evening the oxygen mask was removed and 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 Queen's gold earrings. They

had been removed to bandage Queen's head. All this time
 they had been ~~lying~~ ^{in a plastic bag tucked} in the drawer of the ~~small~~ ^{bedside} table ~~next~~
 to the hospital bed.

"Take these," he said. "She ~~loved~~ ^{prized} them and would
 want you to wear them, at least ~~for now~~ ^{until she's released}."

Bride touched her earlobes, felt the tiny holes and
 grinned.

"Let me," said Booker. Carefully he inserted the
 wires into Bride's lobes saying, "I'm glad she was wearing
 them when she caught fire 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 swerving her
 head gently back and forth the better to ~~enjoy~~ ^{relish} the gold
~~discs~~ ^{discs}
 hoops.

"No?" He looked out the window.

"Some," Booker replied. "A daughter in Texas, medical student. She'll be easy to find."

Bride stopped playing with the earrings and 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 and she didn't or couldn't take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that."

"I think she loves them though. Their photographs were all over the place."

"Yeah, well 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."

"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, or the Texan. I don't know. Anyway 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 wall space. It's like a roll call. Most of the pictures are of Hannah though—as a baby, a teenager, a high school graduate, winning some prize. More like a memorial than a gallery."

"I thought those photos 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.

Bride and Booker were pleased 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.

Slowly, slowly their plans for the future crumbled, then collapsed altogether. The ^{gaily} 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 as sneaky and evil as the flame that destroyed her trailer was attacking the woman.

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.

During the three days waiting until the ashes were ready, they picked over the choice of an urn. Bride wanted something elegant in brass; Booker preferred something environmentally friendly. When they realized there was no graveyard within thirty miles, or a suitable place in the trailer park for her burial, they settled for a cardboard box to hold ashes that would be strewn into the river. Booker insisted on performing the rites alone while Bride waited in the car.

Although heartfelt, his ceremony was pitiful: the ashes were lumpy and difficult to toss and Booker's musical tribute was out of tune and uninspired. He cut it short, threw his trumpet into the water as though it had failed him rather than he had failed it. He watched the horn float for a while then sat down on the grass resting his forehead in his palm. His thoughts were stark, unpleasant. ^(over) What made him think he was a talented trumpet player or that music could be his language of memory, of celebration or the displacement of loss? How long had childhood trauma hurtled him away from the rip and wave of life?

Queen's remains, touched by a rare welcome breeze, drifted farther and farther down current. The sky, too sullen to keep its promise of sunlight, sent hot moisture instead. Finally, Booker joined Bride sitting alone in the

It never occurred to him that

Green could die or would. An

the while he tended her feet he
was thinking about his own pain,
unease

~~discomfort~~. ~~How~~ his life

was disrupted by the predicament

he was in - caring for an aunt he

loved now broken by her own careless

the sudden return of ^{ness} who had
a woman he loved ~~at ease~~

^
Changed from one dimension into
three - demanding, feisty.

Jaguar.

Inside the quiet is thick, suffocating because there are no tears. Bride took a deep breath before breaking into that unbearable silence.

"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."

Bride took Booker's hand and he threaded his fingers through hers. Leaning back on the headrests they let their spines sink into the seats' soft hide of cattle. Staring through the windshield they started to imagine what might their future be like.

No lonely wandering child with a fishing pole passed by and glanced at the adults in the dusty green car. But if one had he or she might have noticed the slow smiles of the couple, how wide and soft their eyes were but not care at all what caused that shine of happiness.

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 free. All goodness. Minus wrath.

So they believe.