

FALLING DREAMER'S GUIDE TO FLYING AND OTHER MIRACLES

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS/DISSERTATION

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This thesis contains a collection of short stories which are all intertwined. Each story leads into the next and takes place in Alabama.

Contents

Falling Dreamer's Guide to Flying	1
Della	20
Missing	45
Sugarman	65
The Jar Lady	85

FALLING DREAMER'S GUIDE TO FLYING

The witch took me off guard tonight. Her dark figure tipped into my sleep and chased away what good dreams I had left. I couldn't escape her; she sat hard on top of my chest and silenced my screams. I wanted to fly away like I used to do when I was a child with the ground far beneath me and my arms opened wide. She didn't have much of a chance with me then because I could conjure up anything to escape her, alternate between people, places and time, things she couldn't do.

But my sister-girl wills escaped me now, making my plight from her a constant, tedious struggle. Terror weighed me down as I fought to regain movement within our familiar, stiff dance. The witch loved to lay it on thick, she wanted me to feel frightened and alone in order to make it last longer. It was the only way she could reach from the dream world and into the real, by making it feel true in my flesh. Repetition made me ready for her visits, but never immune to realizing the fear of being controlled from within the confines of a dream.

I pulled prayers from everywhere to get her off of me, pleading for somebody or something to come and carry me into the waking hours where it was safe.

Finally, I felt her leaving me. Tingling began in the heels of my feet, spread up into my legs, shot across my chest, and settled on top of my forehead. I was glad to be loose. I rolled over onto my side and took in a deep breath. I had grown careless and allowed myself to fall asleep while lying square on my back. It was a vulnerable position and made me prime picking for a witch-riding well into the wee hours of the morning. In between my breasts were damp and my hair was wet, pressed to one side of my face. My

scarf poked out from beneath my pillow case as if it were just as relieved as I was. I untangled it and tied it right back around my head.

Reaching out I turned on my lamp and kicked back the covers with my feet. The windows were wide opened inside my room and I panicked for a moment as if the night was trying to stick a foot in through my curtains and come claim me next. For all I knew I deserved it all, I understood full well that here in this town, this house, and this room, wickedness would surely try to catch up with me sooner or later.

Strange things always happened in southern towns. This was because people more often believed things they shouldn't, especially here in Deep Creek, Alabama where nothing died. There were far too many high tales and colorful people living past their time and resurrecting them in some shape, form, or fashion in nature.

This was how my father looked to his business of the dead. He was a mortician with the typical, somber look and the gentle but serious voice he greeted the grieving families with. Dressed in his dark suits and smart ties everyone embraced him, Mr. Evandor Benard, owner of Benard and Son's Funeral Home on Oak Tree Lane.

It was all downstairs, the funeral parlor. The living quarters were set apart from the dead by a set of wooden steps in the long white corridor. When I stood at the top, I could feel the air rising up from the cold marble floors down below where the corpses rested. There were several rooms without doors and high arches used for viewings. The bodies were propped in their cushioned boxes like leather dolls. The clean, white walls offered them up like sacrifices to the living as they lied there in their pressed, church clothes, hands folded across their chest or lowered down to their sides as if to say, "look at me, they put me away so good!"

It was all a masquerade. My father did the embalming and my mother did her magic with the hair and make-up, amongst other things. Uncle Warren helped my father with the heavy work of moving the bodies (him and whichever one or two of his sons he'd send over to do the lifting).

The duo was getting old though, which only made my father talk more about his own junior, my brother, Dory. Dory didn't believe in any of this mess. After all, he said for the longest time that being Southern wasn't his thing. He went up north and found his own story. Three months I visited with him in Philadelphia. He was happy out there living amongst the tall buildings and crowded streets. He had his on spotlight which fitted his demeanor and the announced fact that he was never going to be a mortician like our father, ever. Dory said it so much growing up it became his truth and soon as he got away from here and into the college he begged our parents to let him go to, he dropped out and made it good in the heart of city.

I didn't envy him. I simply never had his thirst. Down here in Alabama the slow way was like an IV into my soul. Business was always good and nobody minded that my father didn't even believe in death. He treated the bodies as vacant vessels while expressing to the families it was only a journey of sorts. And they bought into it not only because it was Mr. Benard saying so, but his father and his father's father had said so too. All of them, they were sons of the old town and familiar faces to be believed when it came to the unknown, at least locally.

I got up and closed the windows in my room. I wanted to light a cigarette, but I didn't even smoke. I hoped my parents couldn't hear me bumping around in the room

making noise. They had grown accustomed to my midnight terrors and weary of them as well. There were no words left to share with them. My mother wasn't big on talking about things she claimed would later try to haunt her when nobody was around. And my father, he wasn't much on words. For words I leaned on my Auntie Josephine.

"Anitra?"

"Yeah, it's me. You busy?" I asked, placing the phone on my cheek while I climbed into some clothes from off of the bedroom floor.

"Just finished up with a couple here."

"Can I come over? Sit with you for a while?" I asked.

"I'm always opened, honey."

"I just didn't want to put you out," I said.

"Honey, you're still talking. You could already be here."

I tried to tip-toe my way out of my old room, but it was no good, my mother was already stirred up and sitting down at the kitchen table with her long white slip on and her hair tied back into a purple turban. She huffed on a long cigarette and let the lamp light soak up the traces of smoke before she said something.

"Your father got a call. Said some strange, white man up and died down at the No-Name two nights ago. He fell straight down to the floor. He was an old one too. Heart attack, they thought. But the coroner said the man's motor was as strong as a newborn bull. They were waiting for somebody to come down and claim him."

"Well?"

"Nobody. Nothing. That's when Lenny himself called your father on this phone and said he'd pick up the bill to have that man cremated. Lenny using his own money,

you know something's up. I don't know what. But something."

"I don't know either," I said, zipping up my jacket.

"But you can go find out."

"Tonight? Not tonight, Ma'am. Not me at Lenny's, probably not for a while," I said.

A headache started to move in on my temples. I wasn't in any mood to run down to Lenny's, or the 'No-Name' as my mother called it. His place would be packed with loud music and fresh trouble which already I had enough of.

"Don't get yourself on your high-horse yet, Nitra. You know these legs can't get around like they used to. And I wouldn't be caught dead at the No-Name. Do me this favor, you hear? There's a pulse somewhere in all of this. You go ahead and find it for me," she winked.

Her big eyes looked tired. Her was always going on and on about how she couldn't do much anymore. Maybe it was a good thing; a lot of folks didn't care to see her coming. She was infamous for being inquisitive, getting right down to the heart of folk's business. It was her talent and she charmed it around hard.

Word was somebody church claimed that was one of the ugliest in a while and since then she was on what she called a 'leg break.' Vanity was her weakness.

"Don't make me have to go out and make my rounds. Is that what you're going to force me to do? Open that ice box and hand me my wig, the brown one," she said.

I shook my head. She kept her hair in there for rise and freshness, and it worked miracles, but in the middle of the night, the devilish thing scared unsuspecting houseguests. I walked over to the refrigerator to get my keys off the counter.

“Probably not much to find out though,” I said.

“You live right around the corner from Lenny’s, child. Whenever you go home, and I know you plan on going home sometime this week, you just stop in and you work with what I taught you and get the information. Lenny doesn’t pay for much. Besides, my right hand has been itching like a dry shoulder for days now.”

“I’ll do it. Maybe not tonight, but I’ll do it,” I said.

She let the ashes from her cigarette build up and lean over heavy. I waited for them to fall before I realized she was watching me.

“You going to Jo’s, huh?”

“I figured I’d call on her tonight.”

“There you go. You’re living like a gypsy, going from pillar to post. One night you’re here in your old room, and you know you’re always welcomed, but then you go on over to your Aunt Jo’s. When do you ever find time to spend hours at your own home?”

“Busy, I guess,” I said.

“That’s your dreams talking, Anitra. I know you. Don’t you think that I don’t know my own daughter? Just because I’m not fishing over hands like my sister, Jo, or crazy like Middle, doesn’t mean I can’t see. I heard you making noises same time as the other night, and the night before. Come to think of it, just about the same time they said that man met his end over there at the No-Name.”

“Ma’am, don’t. Don’t even do it. It’s not the-”

“Yes it is. Something’s up, I’m telling you,” she said.

“Not like you are ever going to talk about it. I don’t even know why you ever bring it up.”

“You do have that right. And I still won’t talk about it either. That kind of talk will only have me struggling in the middle of my bed when it’s you and your father both gone and I’m here by myself. My heart can’t take that. Who can I call? My sister? No, baby, you’re going to have to fix it yourself, whatever it is. I’m just observing, and I’ve observed that it’s picked back up on you which means something’s up, something.”

She fixed her mouth to say more but I could tell she was saving it for a later time. She was quiet for a moment with those loud eyes of hers. I planted a light kiss on the side of her cheek and made my way down the corridor.

Aunt Jo came to the door of her back screen porch with her white hair pinned up like a tower of cords. She was tall and thin with a peculiar beauty to her. A litter of glowing candles danced across her tables and dressers arranged in the room. A red and orange tiled mirror hung from the ceiling reflecting our images amongst the blaze.

“Anitra! Look at you! My sugar cookie girl! I can tell they’re feeding you well over there!”

Her words felt good on my ears. I fell into her arms like a child and soaked up some of her energy. She looked down at me and rubbed my back with her hand in a quick circle. I sat down at her teller’s table where the old wood was rubbed down good with oils. She placed two glasses of fruit juice with rounds of lemon rinds floating around at the top. I watched the seeds fall to the bottom.

“No sleep for you, again?”

“Earlier than normal I believe,” I said.

“When are you going to run down and see Mrs. Middle?”

I shook my head. She was the lady with the jars. Jo said she could mix something up quick and have my dreams riding a different horse. But she didn't understand, I wanted my will back, my own sort of hope. What good was this magic if it didn't come from me?

"Nope," I said, "I figure I'll master it myself. Might as well. Her coming as often as she does."

"Seasons, darling, it's all about seasons. Maybe you should pay more attention as to why she comes as opposed to how often."

"Well, I was keeping track in my journal. But even that seemed to make them come across me more. Now I just wait until I'm good and tired. That way I can at least rest."

"You know, your mama used to have those same spells."

"She won't talk about them."

"You and I both know it," she said, "Our daddy had them something terrible too. Claimed it chased him here all the way from North Carolina. Isn't that something? A dream chase a man down like that, makes you think hard as to what exactly is in a dream in the first place? He'd holler out to our mama and light the night up. Mama slipped a glass of water right under the bed without him knowing it. He didn't know any better. If she would have told him, he'd raise his voice and give her sideways talk about fools' magic and how his folks didn't raise him to be a dark magic chaser."

"Did it work?"

"Never heard a peep from him again."

"Hasn't fixed me yet," I said.

“Maybe she’s fixed her eye on you for you for a reason. Like I said before. You won’t do what I say though, hardheaded. But you’ll figure it out for yourself. You sure will. Dream running, can’t run too far though, can you?”

“I know,” I said shaking my head up and down, “Just things back at the house keep me busy. I don’t have much time for myself. Haven’t been to my own place in months, crashing in my old room at my parent’s for weeks at a time now.”

“Your dreams kicked you out of your own house?”

Sounded badly when she said it, although it was true, it’s what I allowed to happen . I called myself helping my parents out more by being there with my mother.

“Watching over the dead makes you weary,” she said, dipping her long fingers into her glass grabbing on to the lemons, “when you should keeping up with the living. That’s no way to keep the heart bright, I’m sure. You know, you can always come here and keep a room just above the garage, all the room you’ll ever need. But I know already, you won’t take it.”

“Yeah, can’t take it,” I said.

“Not can’t, you won’t. Tell me about the other mess unraveling around in your life. Spring came early this year, fitting to be a whole lot of mess spread across this way and the heats not even all the way here yet. I’ve seen it across too many hands so far.”

I let my hands hang loose on top of the table while my elbows rested on the edges. Aunt Jo ran her fingers across them and shook her head.

“And you. I suppose you aren’t going to tell me about this man, will you? And don’t say what man, I can see him just as plain as day.”

I snatched my hands away and let them fall into my lap.

Her big eyes sparkled.

“I don’t know about that one, Anitra. His armor is a little soft around the edges. He needs to be tested. I suppose you’ll be giving him just the test he needs.”

Slightly embarrassed, I rubbed my hands together and folded them across the table. “I’m not sure how I feel about him. It’s something that comes and goes I guess.”

“Time will tell,” she said.

The night picked up a breeze and I was happy to feel it run through in between us. The candles flickered in and out. Her house had that warm sigh breathing through it making it big and cozy. The spring flowers were just picking up and I could smell them through the screening. Her yard started to whisper as it had the knack of doing because around Auntie Jo, everything was alive and spoke to her.

Morning time I went back to my parents’ house after running errands for the funeral home. Downstairs was buzzing. Uncle Warren was dressed in his dull grey suit and my father in his black. They were busy with papers, they only nodded their heads and mumbled under their breath when they saw me. My mother was not so busy upstairs almost where I left her in the kitchen with her hair on tight.

“You go on down there to Lenny’s yet? Find anything out?”

“Not yet, Ma’am”

“Well, one thing is for sure, the answer isn’t over there at Jo’s,” she smirked.

“Here are the new flyers,” I said, placing the package on top of the table. She opened them up and looked at them closely.

“It’s no good, no good at all.”

“Ma’am?”

“These flyers, honey. I told you to go into town and get Orlando to do them. These glossy things. They’re too gaudy. Nobody wants to see death on gloss. Not good.”

“Mr. Wooten is out of town, mom.”

“Out of town. When did this happen? And where did he go?”

“Louisiana I believe,” I said, pouring myself some iced tea and placing a couple of lemons in on the side.

“Louisiana? Orlando? How is it I didn’t know this? I think it’s high time I did my rounds. Orlando off to Louisiana. His wife go with?”

“I saw her up at the store in town,” I laughed.

“I’m missing the world, I see. Orlando just started that business, and already taking a vacation. Seems to me he should have somebody run the store while he’s gone. At least have that lazy wife of his run things in his absence. Folks amaze me how money doesn’t faze them in this economy.”

Her voice got high and sat on the back of her throat.

“Not very smart I’d say. These are good months for business, you know? And how dare they go missing from town without letting us know. Good customers as we are, your father and I. Now we have to, or you, you had to go into that glossy, glitter bright store and get things done.”

She smacked her lips together and shook her head.

“And look at you, iced tea in the morning Anitra? Really? Keeps your nerves on edge. I guess we will have to go with the glossy. But I don’t like it all.”

“I know,” I said.

“Tomorrow’s Sunday, you go around and put these out. Be sure to stop by Lenny’s.”

Her robe hung down a bit showing off her legs. She was in her resting phase now, waiting to the weather picked up more so she could go out and show off around town, gossiping. Her feet were covered up by red satin slippers with pink roses planted on top of them. Her hair was tucked tight into a red turban. She sat the stacks of glossy flyers into the yellow envelope. They were rectangle and sharp. Her fingers were careful not to rub them hard on the edges.

Sunday service was long and boring. Sleep deprived, I found my head bobbing and weaving while the choir sang. My pew neighbor nudged me until I finally decided to duck out early, excusing myself across everyone’s knees and polite smiles.

The spring air woke me up a bit. I delayed going home and shot by Felton’s, the man Aunt Jo was polite enough not to call by name when she saw him in my palms last night. I looked forward to seeing his face. He inherited the hardware store from his father. Nudged right into the corner of town. He didn’t mind me putting the flyers on his counter.

“Morning, Nitra,” he said.

He was back and forth with boxes from the back. The sleeves of his stiff white shirt were rolled up around his forearms. I smiled at him, looking handsome behind his lightly trimmed beard and dark brown eyes.

“Hey, now,” I said.

Then I noticed she was there, his fiancée, Pamela. She sat on a work bench, legs

crossed and feet tapping in heels to the beat of the music playing from the intercom. In her lap she played with a ring of wall colors she had encased on a clasp. Her eyes gave me one good look over.

“No dead today?” she asked.

“Just the living,” I said.

“So far.”

She smiled a full smile after that, pleased with her. The back of her hand reached up to bump her hair over to the side and out of her face to let her eyes do some of their work. She was used to looking good.

“Parents doing good?” Felton asked.

“As ever,” I said.

“Where are your parents from again?” Pamela asked.

Pamela knew the answer to that already, she wasn’t that new in town. She didn’t grow up here, but everybody knew us, the Benards, born and raised right here.

“Here, same place as last.”

“Shame to just be from, here. There’s a whole world out there, you know.”

She reminded me of Dory, itching to get out of town and always feeling restricted by his zip code. Felton didn’t see it yet, but she was flighty.

“I thought you already knew that, honey. You know the Benards,” Felton said, placing gallons of paint on the counter.

“I could have sworn they were from somewhere else. Just a small circle is all, thought they might have sailed in on a different wind. Well I’m from Mobile, Anitra. You ever been to Mobile?”

“Can’t say that I have.”

“All these years right here in Deep Creek and you mean to tell me you’ve never been to Mobile”

“Maybe through it,” I said, rolling my eyes.

I didn’t want Felton to see me testy, his princess would pucker up more if I gave her that satisfaction.

“Figures, you don’t look the type to know about Mobile.”

“She doesn’t mean any harm,” Felton said.

“Don’t do my talking,” Pamela said.

“That’s alright, Felton, I’ll come around when the smoke clears. Here are the flyers. Usual spot, right?”

I set them up while Pamela sucked in wind.

Lenny’s Juke Joint was directly in my path after church . I paused before making the turn into the clay parking lot, but I wasn’t in a rush to go home to my own place. For once Lenny’s spot was a welcomed detour.

It was Sunday morning and the crowd was a little thin. The old men, three of them, sat over near the window with their legs crossed and their hands folded over their bellies. They greeted me with smiles and compliments. I nodded my head and moved over to the bar where Lenny’s sister, Tanya, was standing, counting money and talking on the phone.

“No business here for you today!”

The old men laughed, I smiled and pulled a stool up to the bar, waiting for Tanya

to hang up.

“What do you need Anitra? Tell Mrs. Benard no other information is over here for her. I told her that the night Lenny called. She buzzed right back and asked me a million and one questions. She’s good, that one, your mom, gangbusters. But I don’t have much to add ,” she said.

“Not even the man’s name?” I asked.

“All the men folks around him only knew him for a stretch of five whole days. They said he went by Cutter.”

“Cutter?”

“Yeah, a carpenter, girl. He worked with some of the men in town. Down there for Mr. Shaw. ‘Bout a whole day.”

“One day?”

“One.”

She started wiping down the bar and moving things around.

“Where you think the man came from?”

“Sounded like he blew in from Louisiana to me. But I don’t know. You know me, I don’t mingle much. I’m the one doing all the busy work around here,” she said.

“And where’s Lenny today?”

“Church,” she said.

Something was definitely up. Lenny wasn’t the church going type. Tanya walked from around the bar and came and sat in the stool next to me. Her eyes stared into the dirty mirrors on the wall.

“He came in, the old white man, not messing with anybody. Kept to himself

mostly. He sat right over there,” she pointed, “near the door. It was a slow night too, so it’s not like anybody was messing with him or talking to him. Nobody knew him really. Everyone was still learning him. Lenny only took to paying for his ashes because nobody else stepped up and if would have dropped dead in the bushes outside instead of on the floor here inside, would have been a different story.”

“Be honest, Tanya. You’re not just a little bit curious as to what’s really behind your brother putting up money like that for another man’s funeral? Lenny’s known for his hospitality and all, but everybody knows that man holds onto a dollar until it screams,” I said.

She shifted a little in her seat and let her leg rest down on the piping on the bottom of the bar. She placed her hand on my wrists, the tops of her fingernails all bitten well down, almost raw.

“I’d hardly call a cremation a funeral. Don’t go around making it bigger than what it is. Just bad business to have somebody up and croak at your place of business and don’t anybody step up to do the right thing. This is a place folks come to feel alive some nights, not have a drink and watch the dead fall over the damn place. But what would you know about that?”

I let her words roll down off my shoulder. She was good at talking sideways to folks.

“Shame to put somebody away and don’t have a name though,” I said.

“I’m sure you, your mother, or your auntie, between the three of you somebody can come up with something.”

The door opened up letting a ray of sunshine in shooting across the floor and

bouncing up against dull mirrors and walls. Tanya squinted her eyes for a moment and then went right back to being busy. It wasn't nobody but Old Piano Joe, he was dressed up well and fresh from church.

"Morning ladies," he said tipping his hat.

"Morning Joe," I said, Tanya nodded her head at him.

"What you here for now, young lady?" he asked me.

"Just checking on you all over here," I said.

I started fiddling with my purse and pulling down from the stool without letting my skirt ride up too high up my behind.

"You looking good there, Ms. Anitra. That's what I like, nice healthy women. Thick in the thighs," Joe said, being fresh.

"Watch it now Joe! You done left the church and now going to straight to hell," the men hollered over.

Tanya turned on some music and started stocking the shelves behind the bar. She was done with talking, but I thanked her anyway.

"Folks been showing their faces more and more round here. Summer ain't even here yet," Joe whispered into my ear, he didn't miss a chance in trying to get close, "Let me walk to your car now, Ms. Anitra," he said, his gold tooth on the side shining.

I put my arm through his and told him to come on.

"Right with you," he said.

Mail was stacked up high on the steel bench in front my house. It was cold and dark on the inside with a stale, stuffy smell that lingered around each corner. Everything

was in its place. I made sure to open every window in the house to get the air circulating. The feeling of home escaped me despite the fact I was home. I undressed myself and threw my clothes everywhere until I reached my bedroom and settled down on my bed.

The Caribbean blues danced across my walls. A Sea of whites sailed across my canopy bed and at least made me feel comfortable. The sunlight poured into my room through the windows as the curtains parted ways. Everything felt good. Sleep snuck up on me as I rested my back against my arrangement of pillows. I felt safe as I drifted off into sleep.

Once there, I saw something. A tall dark figure standing at the threshold of my door. He stood there watching me, I could tell he couldn't cross just like I couldn't move. Still I fought. The pillows on my bed started edging out from under me, the pillow cases reached out touched my face. I struggled to speak, but nothing came out. The figure was unmoved, he was void of a face or any distinguishing features. I started to feel frightened, as if I was in danger. But there was nothing I could do, I was stuck on my bed in the daylight hours.

The figure continued to stand there, wanting me to see it. When I got smart enough to try and focus on it, it turned away and left. Immediately making me able to move.

It was getting bolder now. I opened my nightstand drawer and threw my journals across my bed and started to write it all down. But even then, after turning through all of the pages, I was overwhelmed. I didn't want to write. My phone rang, startling me further.

"It's your mother, honey. You went to Lenny's?"

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“And? Don’t make me have to pull it out of you.”

“Nobody knows his real name. He went by Cutter, worked for the Smaws, might be from Louisiana.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” she said.

“And hold on to your stocking cap for this one, some stranger popped into town overnight. White man. Oh boy, I can’t wait until my pressure goes down so I can exercise my legs all over town about that one.”

“I don’t have a clue what you talking about,” I said, “I’m going back to sleep.”

“I suppose I’ll be seeing you tonight then. Sounds like your dreams talking. You’re going to let those dreams get you yet.”

I got up, went into the kitchen for a small glass and water to put dead center, underneath my bed.

DELLA

Nana Josephine lived in a big country house in Deep Creek, Alabama where the grass grew for miles and miles. Her house was a camel's tan with a triangular hump for a roof at the top. It stretched wide and stood tall against all the other houses on her street lined up like new, square boxes in a row. The old neighborhood had faded away leaving Nana Jo's one of the only houses left standing with pronounced bones and character.

Every other summer my parents sent me here away from Jersey while they spent sugar-time in the city. This was what they called my vacation, a way to reconnect with my roots. Nana Jo was more than enough, she allowed me to have kids rights and grown up rights all around the house. We made up words and phrases and exchanged stories at night.

People liked Nana Jo (when she did things for them). They came calling in the middle of the night for her to read over their hands and tell them things they should have already known for themselves. Summer time brought this kind of need up in heaps turning people's temperatures up, I guess. If God wanted people to know more than what they could see then he'd be sure to tell them directly. It sure was fun seeing folks come and through. I liked this sort of mess and had gotten used to the going-ons.

But this was only the second time my older brother, Jamal, came here. He was much older than me. Cooler too. Except this summer because all his mighty high-talking and 'ass-on-his-shoulders' acting landed him right here with me, (a punishment he couldn't seem to see straight over).

I almost felt sorry for him, Alabama was hard on the lively. Long, hot days wore

the body down. Sometimes it got so warm the streets blurred together and danced. But Nana Jo's wasn't so bad. Late at night when the sky was the blackest, she'd do her advising inside the womb of her screened-in, back porch for her customers. Sometimes I crept down into the kitchen to listen and watch. She'd touch their willing palms and read the lines in their flesh while they asked one dumb question after the other. Mostly about love. Seemed like they either couldn't get enough of it, or too much of it was coming from the wrong person. And just when I got to listening really good and all of it was rushing over my ears like the best of truth, Nana Jo would call for me to run my tail back up the steps and into my room.

This wasn't Jamal's scene at all. He was a fiend for blacktops, busy shores with no swim, and gamer marathons that stretched the days out. Nana Jo wasn't hard on him though. She gave him chores to tame his temper. When night fell he disappeared into the streets with free privileges to her old, Cadillac, a perk he would never get at home.

I stayed close to the house and kept my place on the porch, my favoritest of all places. It wrapped around the entire house as if God's great white apron. I kept tabs on the row of magnolia trees to the side. They lit up the air with a pissy, sweet perfume that made bees buzz in and out of them for minutes at a time around the buds. A line of pink bushes in the front of the porch balanced out the smell. Leading up to the porch was the white sidewalk in a perfect shaped 'U'. I used to be the one who pulled up all of the weeds from in between the cracks, but that was until Della started moving.

Old ugly Della. She stood tall in the yard with her long stiff arms reaching far into the clear blue sky. Her green hair was full of split ends which hung limp and long as they tip-toed against the soft-pressed grass. She was wild. People tried to act like she wasn't

there sometimes, looking like a witches broom frayed at the ends. Once in a while somebody would ask the obvious, “Josephine, when are you going to cut down that terrible tree?” I’d listen closely waiting for something more than her usual answer. But she wasn’t giving it up. Della was family.

“Your great grandfather planted that weeper for his dead sister, Delores. Shame how they found that girl. Her blood spilled right there where her namesake stands now. She must have hollered out, you know? And no one came. Can you imagine all of that hollering and for no one to come? Even nature itself doesn’t take to that kind of business lightly,” she said, pointing to Della.

“Nana, you don’t have to keep telling this tale!” I lied.

“You be mindful. Nana Jo tells no tales,” she said, taking a seat down on the porch step next to me, her knees bending deep.

“Humph,” was all I could manage. The day was already too humid to try and match wits with Nana Jo.

“Freda, you can’t spend all your summers on my porch. You just about worn a hole in this spot. Why don’t you go on over there to Newtown and play with some of your little girlfriends? The world doesn’t move much from this view.”

“Newtown? They aren’t my friends over there.”

Nana Jo was always testing folks. She knew I wasn’t much for making new friends. Not even after all the summers at her place. The kids around here didn’t like me much. Mainly they didn’t like Nana Jo. Her reputation for helping folks trickled down into the street as her being nothing more than a common witch who would sooner stir you up into a pot and have you missing for a good 30 days before the police checked on you.

Her tall, slender frame didn't help any. She didn't have the plump, grandmamma appeal. Instead she was the pretty but stern looking stepmother type. The kind with the bright, bright lipstick, and pointy fingers.

"You managed a mouthful, Freda," she said, patting my hand.

I pulled my legs in close and hugged them with my chin nestled directly in the center of my knees. Della's branches creaked as her hair shuck lightly. A couple of leaves fell down onto the grass.

"Yes, Ma'am, Ms. Freda, I think right there is one of the favoritest things I've heard you say so far this summer," she laughed.

When the sun went down, we went back outside and sat on the east wing of the porch, closest to Della. We played pretty lady in the night air wearing streams of fake pearls around our necks and wrists which caught at the strings in our thin robes. Nana Jo's locks of long white hair were diamond ropes under the moonlight. For a moment I wished the two plaits on my head were hers instead. I settled for a glass tiara as a crown and began stroking Nana Jo's nails hot-mama, red as Aretha sang about respect from the raggedy radio propped up on an old book in the window.

"Red shouts for sure," I said.

I loved the color. Though it didn't favor me yet. No matter, Nana Jo and my mom were late bloomers. Soon enough I'd have hips that curved and just enough titties to hold my shirt up right. Maybe when I turned thirteen they would come in just right (and not lopsided like my friend Kenya's with one big and the other one small).

"Well, I guess it is. You know, some folks are scared to death over red. It might

work for you I reckon. If you can pull it off,” she said, looking over her nails.

“Not yet,” I said.

“Don’t worry, honey pink is precious too. But yellow, that just might be your color, though,” she winked.

We laughed while our jewels swung back and forth. When our smiles calmed, we sat back and rested our eyes on Della as she leaned into the moonlight. I liked the way the soft glow fell down across the top of her head making her look almost.

A rustling echoed over from the front part of the porch. I stretched my neck out a bit to see who it was. Jamal came walking toward us with a serious look on his face. A small white grocery bag swung from his hand.

“And your day, sir?” Nana Jo asked.

“Good-good,” he said.

He stood there as his bag dangled. Two chocolate candy bars rested at the bottom.

“Where have you been?” I asked.

“Filled it up, Nana Jo. ” he said, handing her the car keys and ignoring me.

“You made your way over there to Newtown?” she asked.

“No. Mostly over there on the back road this evening,” he said.

“Don’t tell me. You found your way into something or somewhere you ought not to be. Right into the hands of the No-Name, huh?”

“No-Name, what’s that?” he asked.

“Lenny’s, honey. He didn’t have a sign on the place for a long while. Even would have some church meetings held there sometimes when the old church in town burnt down. Anyway, nothing like that going on there now. You need to be careful down

there.”

“I am,” he said.

“Umm hmm. That old shake shack will swallow you whole if you let it. For starters, liquor isn’t the only thing you’re a little too young for. Lenny’s ain’t nothing but a run-down, old, dirty juke joint sitting right on the pulse of an idle vein. But I promised your parents I see to you this summer, might even teach you a lesson or two. We shall see.”

Jamal and I both exchanged looks with that one. Nana Jo always had something up her sleeve.

“I know I haven’t seen one solid, black top yet. I saw a couple with weeds growing over and dustings of red clay. But no basketball courts? Not even a mall nearby worth talking about? Straight boring,” he complained, “Not much here has changed from summers ago. Nothing but this neighborhood. They built right around and over your house. A couple of others just like it.”

“Change is inevitable, but if you’re always in a haste there’s not much you’re going to enjoy,” she laughed, “And you, Mr. Big-Bad Jersey, I know you’ve seen gentrification before. It’s not *always* a cussing word you know. They pushed some of us old folks right on out there clean to Rosemont. It’s nothing new. Just the cycle of things. You see I’m not going anywhere and a couple of others too. My house is good and paid for. Taxes too. Your grandfather made sure of that before he passed.”

Jamal’s eyebrows rose upward. He took a seat on the railing and tapped the post with his thumbs.

“I’m going on in the house to catch a nap. You kids tidy up for me, hear?”

“Yes, Nana Jo,” I said.

She got up and twisted off all of her custom jewelry with one hand. Jamal moved into her seat and propped his legs up over my lap.

“Get your feet off of me.”

“Look at you. I can see it in your face. You’ve been here on the porch all day long. Let me feel your forehead,” he said, acting as if he were going to nurse me, “Just what I thought, sweating Nana Jo with temperature of 200 degrees. Let the woman rest sometimes, damn.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t ever move from this porch. You’re stuck like Chuck up here. Keep at it, I promise you, you’ll turn into stone.”

“Where else am I supposed to go? It’s not like I can drive all over the place like you do when you know you’re not supposed to. I’m sure Daddy would have something to say about that.”

“Well he ain’t here; now, is he? Besides, you need to air your head out from all the voodoo you two work up together. That shit ain’t healthy.”

“What do you know?”

“I know the old, white lady from across the street comes over every other evening and puts the talking cuffs on Nana Jo’s ears.”

“Mrs. Curtis?”

“Yeah, her. The old ass white lady with the shakes. She must need somebody to talk to because the older you get, not that many lines to be read. Hell, how much does the future change anyway? Whenever I see her back there with Nana Jo, she’s bawling those

nosey eyes out of hers.”

“Crying that hard, Mrs. Curtis?”

“You know what? I don’t even know why I’m talking to you, for real.”

Jamal stood up and sighed. He reached deep into his pocket and started skipping pennies out onto the front grass that reached far enough to bounce up off of Della’s dark trunk.

“What do you have to do that for?” I asked, annoyed.

“Not you too. Boy, oh, boy! This place sure does carry electricity that’s high on crazy. Maybe you caught some of it. You and some of everybody else around here. It’s in everything too. Even that ug-mug of a tree over there. I cut the grass down for her the other day and the mower wouldn’t even go under the tree. Thick-ass turf under there I guess. The damn roots stand up from out the ground and bleed like bricks, rust-colored blood. Just an eyesore if you ask me.”

“Della.”

“What did you say?”

“Della,” I said, standing up next to him and stretching, “That’s her name, the tree. She’s got a name just like everything else.”

Jamal shook his head and disappeared into the house. I was right behind him until I saw a champagne car pulled into the driveway. The headlights jumped around to the side of the house right to where I stood. I regained my position on top of the bench and let my hands slip under my behind. A pair of heavy feet sifted through the grass. I crooked my neck to see who it was, they cast a long shadow against the porch.

It sounded like a pair of men’s feet shifting their way through the grass. His frame

cast a long shadow against the porch.

“You looking for Nana Jo?” I asked, knowing good and well he was. I supposed I wanted to startle him or at least be able to lift some clues from him.

“Oh, shucks! Didn’t see you there. You’re Nana Jo’s granddaughter, right? Fran?”

“Freda,” I corrected him.

He owned one of those handsome faces, the kind with strong bones and nice features that forced folks to stare into his eyes more than they would an average looking stranger.

“Yeah, yeah,” he said.

He looked nervous and preoccupied, like love was beating something terrible down on him.

“She’s back there,” I pointed.

He put his hands in his pockets for a moment as if he was thinking about something and when it left him, he marched right on to the back. I tip-toed back into the house and hung close to the kitchen sit square down on the floor.

“How do you do this evening Mr. Felton,” I heard Nana Jo say, “Fine evening to catch me.”

Nana Jo’s candles were burning strong. Felton was stiff. I could see him from out the corner of the cabinets as I looked up from the floor. Nana Jo’s back was towards me.

“Not big on these things as you know Ms. Josephine. You know me.”

He hesitated in putting his hands on top of the table. When he did he balled them up into fists.

“How about you try reading my hand, Honey.”

“Read your hand?” Felton asked.

“Sure, if you don’t mind.”

“I know what you’re trying to do, really I do. Just thought I’d get here and be ready, but I’m not,” he said.

He was starting to sweat. His fists tried to relax but his fingers kept flexing back into his palms.

“You’re not ready,” Nana Jo said to him in a gentle voice, “Just look at my hand, I’ll show you.”

His eyes stared down at the table. Nana Jo had funny looking ones too, thick and long running like forks all across her hands. I saw him reach in and touch the lines, then took his palm back and shook his head.

“Yeah, I don’t know why I came. Guess I just needed someone to talk to,” Felton said.

“I suppose.”

“I’m asking her to marry me you know. Pamela, you know her don’t you?”

“The young lady from Mobile, huh? I’ve seen her.”

“After two years I think it’s about time. Though I swear I can’t seem to pinpoint just why I’m feeling like I do. But I suppose a part of me is just still feeling sort of shocked from my father’s passing, you know? Soon is all. I don’t think she would turn me down, but still, I’m missing something, just quite don’t know what it is yet.”

“If you ask me, the answer is probably right on your wrist,” Nana Jo offered up and placed her hand on his forearm.

He looked straight to his watch and his face hardened.

“No, no. I think it was a mistake to come here. No offense to you Miss Josephine, and I know there’s none taken, you’ve done this sort of thing for a long time and all. I guess I just wasn’t ready, time I guess is what you’re trying to tell me right? Time. I guess it’s hard not to get carried away with doubts and demons when you’re about to make a life change. Nerves I’d say.”

Then things got really quite. I had to pop up higher to see them over the counter to see exactly what was going on. Nana Jo had pressed down his arms making his hands fold out. He looked at her with raised eyebrows and tried to say something in protest but it was half-hearted. She looked down at his hands for a solid minute and then looked back taking the time to place his hands one inside of the other.

“When you ready come back to here to me and I’ll tell you everything it is you want to know.”

He seemed relieved and still placed a couple of green ones in the box she had sitting there on the table. He nodded his head at her making himself appear more awkward than he already looked. Seemed like the stupidest thing I had ever witnessed, a grown man coming in for a reading and not walking away with one because he was too scared. I covered my mouth and let out a little giggle to myself.

“Ain’t nothing funny about folks’ problems child. You run yourself right up those steps and get yourself into the bed before I beat your palms for eavesdropping on your Nana Jo again.”

Suitcases full of dark skies unpacked themselves in the morning. They paused and grumbled here and there with no real threat, making the streets look dull and grey. The air

was still thick and hot as ever, making my skin feel electric.

It was pie day. Pecan, cherry, lemon-meringue, strawberry-rhubarb, and chocolate mousse pie day. People came from their cookie cutter houses and bought them by the baker's dozen. Ms. Thomas from Magnolia Avenue put her morning face on and came on down to help with the baking today. They chatted back and forth in the kitchen like birds while hitting pots and pans together.

I stayed out on the porch where it was a degree cooler. Della kept me company. She seemed to sigh and slump against the heat. She was just as bored as I was.

I studied the corners of the street while the sky thought about doing something. There were hardly any kids on Nana Jo's revitalized block. At least not any my age. Sometimes a few of the kids from Newtown would fly by riding on bikes or roller skates making the a big U-turn in front of the house and heading on back the few blocks over to get back to their neighborhood.

Fast Fannie Legs was that kid today. She shot from around the corner on top of her bright, red beach cruiser with the perfect black tires and white tread. She was sharp against the porcelain white sidewalks her tight braids breezing behind her.

"Hey, stick-girl! Hey!" she hollered.

I wanted to wave or to say something clever but she was too quick.

"Why aren't you out our way? All stuck up at your grand-mama's house all the time. I know it's boring over here. Everybody knows Ms. Josephine doesn't have cable or even a computer. I bet she doesn't even have a cell phone. Even my grandpa has a cell phone. Old people need those for emergencies," she was talking a mile a minute leaning hard on one leg while the other rested over the seat of her bicycle.

“She gets along just fine,” I said.

“I know that’s right. Now, don’t get mad at me. But you know what they say about your grandma. She stays right here in this big ole house with folks creeping in the backdoor wanting things they shouldn’t.”

“How do you even know, Fannie?”

“I know because I know. I know everything. I know that your brother shoots pool over there down at Lenny’s for money and I know he’s some kind of good.”

“How the heck do you know that?” I asked, coming down off the porch and standing closer to her. She kept popping her gum from side to side.

“My mama’s friend works at Lenny’s. She said she almost lost her job when she saw Ms. Josephine’s hearse I mean, Cadillac parked out in the parking lot.”

I rolled my eyes over her face and picked at the mosquito bites on my arm. She stood there laughing with her hand on her bike. Popping gum from one side of her mouth to the other.

“What you doing here anyway? It’s about to rain.”

“It ain’t going to rain Fred-o-lay. Not yet. Just the sky preparing for things. Your skies don’t do that in Jersey? And anyways you know what I came for.”

She got off of her bike and let it fall down into the grass. It looked sorry to be hers the way it staggered down to the ground. She reached into her back pocket and pulled out a new twenty dollar bill folded into a tiny triangle. She started to unfold it when Nana Jo came out onto the front porch with a strong broom gripped in her hand. She frowned a little bit when she saw Fannie but greeted her nonetheless.

“Morning, Fantasia. How’s your mother?”

“She’s good. Sent me over for one chocolate and one cherry,” Fannie smiled.

“I’ll bring ‘em out. Freda, you hit up this porch before the rain comes.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

Nana Jo gave me a stern look and closed the screen door behind her.

“I thought she was going to fly clean away on that broom!” Fannie laughed.

“Aren’t you one to talk,” I huffed.

“I bet she can put a potion together to make you look less like the number 11 and more like the number 8.”

“Whatever she can do, it’s a lot better than what your Mama has going on,” I mumbled low. I knew she heard me still.

“What you stuttering about?”

“Nothing,” I said.

Della shook her head at it all. Fannie wasn’t about to say a word otherwise about her mother. Nana Jo may have been the one with the black hat, but Fannie’s mother just plain wasn’t around.

“And I heard you anyways,” she said, kneeling down into Nana Jo’s shallow rock bed close to the bushes by the porch.

She scooped up a couple of pebbles and gave me a quick once over. I almost felt sort of bad about what I said. Almost. It was always the speedy tongues that got so serious about things. She started skipping the pebbles across the grass and hitting Della’s branches. Della was unmoved. I wanted to warn her. But she was the one high-talking all afternoon about Nana Jo so I turned my back and started sweeping off the porch like Nana Jo said.

“Oh damn!”

That quick and Fannie was on the grass holding her jaw and speaking into her hand.

“It got me! It got me! I know it, it got me!”

I dropped the broom and moved closer to her, my heart pounding. Touches of blood streamed down her chin.

“You just standing there looking stupid. Go on and get me something to clean this up. Your damn whipping tree got me.”

“Weeping,” I corrected her.

“Weeping-whipping, get me something!”

“What in the Sam-blue hell are you two nuts doing?”

We looked up. Jamal stood on the porch, arms crossed on his chest. Fannie started crying, slow tears slid down her cheeks. I helped her stand up.

“Da hell you crying about?” Jamal asked her.

She sucked it up in one sniff. Jamal gave her a balled up paper towel from out of his pocket and she bunched across the thin scratch across her face.

“Nothing. I guess some things just don’t stay in their place around here. Nothing new.”

He shook his head and gave her a smart look. I picked the rocks back up spotted around the lawn. A few rested right under Della where her limbs bore down on me and ran over the top of my hair. She just stroked and stroked as I dipped and crawled around beneath her placing each rock in the center of my hand.

When everyone went their separate ways Nana Jo and I sat on the porch in our usual spots. Della's hair drooped longer than usual and the cool breeze did nothing to move her. Nana Jo with her glasses on reading the obituaries.

"Look at this, Candace Williams died, I went to school with her....she was a saint. And I see Mr. Mitchell has gone on home too, 98, that's something, ripe I tell you."

"That's a long time. But I bet it still feels too soon," I said.

"Death is like a child being born, when it comes, it comes," she said, not looking up from her paper.

"Well, I don't want to die, and I don't think I want any babies either."

"Keep living."

From down the street we heard company approaching. Sounded like High Noon with the jingle of loose change in his pockets and the rattle of empty tin cans in his rusted grocery cart. He was a dirty looking man. He stunk too; like a bottle of liquor my daddy kept in the cabinet for special occasions. Only with High Noon there were no special occasions. He collected cans in the morning and by high noon he was drunk.

"Hey there Josephine...lil' Freda," High Noon said, tipping his filthy hat and patting the threads of his heavy overcoat.

"And you too, sir," Nana Jo said, setting down her paper.

"I see you here for another summer," High Noon said, leaning over his cart.

"Just a couple of weeks."

"Any cans?" he asked Nana Jo.

"I believe I may. Freda, go ahead and sweep off the porch again and I'll be right back."

I took up the broom and swept to and fro until I could hear her deep within the house. For Nana Jo, sweeping before the storm was like a religion. It warded off bad things and offered up grace to enter the house. I went through the motions.

“You’re not hot in that coat?” I asked.

“You hot in that skin?” he asked me back, “My bones have turned cold. I can’t let the air get to me,” he said, patting his knotted fingers over the buttons of his coat.

“Even when it’s hot like it’s been?”

“Ain’t you heard me?! I don’t feel heat. All I feel is cold air!”

“All the time?”

“All day long,” he laughed, his jack-o-lantern teeth offering up a smile.

He watched my eyes and shook his head.

“I wasn’t always like this, you know. For starters I used to be the champ ‘round here. Top horseshoe winner in all of Deep Creek County.”

High Noon paused as Della gently swept her leaves over the tails of his worn coat. He tilted his head as if he was thinking hard on a thought or two.

“I was really something . Your Nana can tell you. I had a job over at the factory before they tore down this neighborhood. The old neighborhood, not this shiny new one they put up over it. We lived right down the street; me and my wife. We had a Queen Anne just down there,” he said, pointing.

He was going for the long haul. The same stories over and over again. But he was right; he was something else in his day. Or at least that’s what the pictures Nana Jo of him said. Cool Mr. Walter Briggs with a house and a wife.

“I tell you one thing. You young people better cherish your youth instead of

running around and messing with me all the time. Throwing things in my cart when I'm not looking. Like that little friend of yours, that girl with the red bike. What's her name?"

"Fannie?"

"That's her! That little fresh-mouth thing. Kids today. I swear, they'd tear the devil up in hell if they could get to him."

"She just gets a little carried away," I offered.

"And you defending her, and for what? I bet she gets your goat every time and walks it around. You keep thinking that's your friend. I know rats that get along better."

He was right, I couldn't deny him that. I heard Nana Jo's feet picking up in the back of the house fast approaching.

"Here you go now Walter," Nana Jo said, coming out of the house with a bag of empty soda cans in one hand and a foiled over pie in the other, "Freshly made."

"Thank you Josephine. You are my angel," High Noon said, giving her a slight bow.

"You come around later and I'll see to the buttons on that coat for you. Make it just like new."

"I don't believe I can turn you down, can I now?"

"You can try," Nana Jo laughed.

"I'll be back. I'mma go on over and rest this here cart for a minute. You'll see me Jo, and then maybe you can run those fingers over this old man's set of skin gloves."

Soon as High Noon turned the corner Mrs. Curtis came from across the street made her way onto our porch. Her face was pink and her house coat snug around her big

round bosom.

“Afternoon ya’ll. Another pie day I see,” she said, her voice wavering.

“Same to you,” said Nana Jo, “Up for a cherry, your usual?”

“Oh, no thank you. Not yet.”

“Yes, well, have a seat,” Nana Jo said.

“Uh, no, don’t want to bother you. Really, I’ll stand,” she said.

I tried to imagine her walking that walk to the back porch and sitting at Nana Jo’s reading table. Her plump palm turned upward and her untrusting eyes looking directly into Nana Jo’s. I wondered what she asked Nana Jo back there, she didn’t have anyone to love anymore.

“Yes well, uh, it’s just that, some of the other neighbors feel, uh, they feel like the Walter gentleman shouldn’t come around as much as he does doing his ‘collecting’,” she said, clutching her throat in a tight hold with her hand.

“I see,” said Nana Jo.

“I mean, Josephine, I don’t mean to trouble you.”

“No trouble.”

“I know they are building new construction throughout here, but that part of town creeping into this part of town, well it is all so complex,” Mrs. Curtis said, choking herself now.

“Well Constance, I must tell you flat out. This may be a new and improved neighborhood, but its bones are old and strong. And like I say all the time, anybody who wants to come to my house and feel welcomed will always be welcomed.”

Even I knew Nana Jo was talking about Mrs. Curtis’ late; old man, Mr. Curtis. He

used to wander over dressed in his bathrobe and rest under Della's bosom. His mind had left him and it would be breakfast-time on Nana Jo's porch before Mrs. Curtis would come over to take him back home.

"I'm so sorry Josephine, Henry did love this house and that, that tree, and I know you-"

"Have a seat Constance dear, Freda is going to serve us some pie and we are going to put a smile into this gloomy day."

The evening rolled around and the sky finally gave it all up. One rumble and rain began to pour down.

"We better go in the house and get some candles," Nana Jo said, when the sky began to shake.

We were in the kitchen when all the lights went out. A strike of lightning echoed throughout the house. My heart was pounding and I started giggling nervously to myself.

"Here they go." I handed Nana Jo the candles. "Why don't you have a flashlight around here?"

"Hush, child, let me light these candles."

Another bolt of lightning cracked across the sky and shook the house. My ears hurt and I felt my bladder bulge, but instead I raced to the front door and looked outside. The sky was pitch black and the air full of electricity. Della was outlined in a pregnant dark mass with smoke rising all around her.

"Nana, Nana, it's Della!"

She shuffled up behind me and paused over the scene, "No, baby, that's Walter."

Nana Jo pushed past me and ran out onto the front yard. Her long, old legs moved fast! She reached over the dark slump resting against the tree. The lights flickered back on and I went out onto the front porch and clang to the post, frozen. Della was wild. Her top branches wailed while her bottom branches worked to help her pull High Noon onto the clear part of the grass, away from Della. His clothes were blasted clean off of him and lay about the yard. The rain began to slack up a bit as Nana Jo tried to bring him back. Her hands on his chest, her mouth on his mouth, Della's limbs reaching to comfort and console. It is all a mess, a big dead mess!

“Child, don't just stand there! Call for help.”

But my body was frozen.

“Josephine! Josephine!” Mrs. Curtis came walking fast towards us with a paper bonnet tied over her head, “I saw it...poor Walter, oh honey, I just called the police,” she said out of breath.

“He...He was walking down the street to your house. Then I guess, I don't know, I saw him grab at his chest but then he went back and forth with that terrible cart. When he went to take a seat under...that, that tree I just saw him sitting there and I figured he was alright. I went on about my noodles on the stove, but when the lightning struck, I looked out my window and there was nothing but smoke and...and darkness! Oh, someone ought to be here soon,” she said, “Is he breathing?”

“Struggling to,” Nana Jo said.

“Oh, Jesus, that poor man,” Mrs. Curtis said, patting her breasts.

“I had invited him to dinner. I guess he got stuck in the storm. I tell you, it's a shame. It's a crying shame.”

The rain stopped. Mrs. Curtis and I sat still on the porch, Nana Jo was out in the yard with High Noon. Seemed like we waited a long time for someone to show up to 59 Orchid Avenue.

Mrs. Curtis rocked back and forth. I hugged my knees into my chest. Nana Jo rubbed my cold back, “This moment will pass, suga. Mr. Walter will . He’ll be just fine.”

A collage of lights came racing down the street and I edged back into a safe corner on the porch to watch and listen, but my eyes and ears were not big enough.

Noise and questions came from all directions.

“Ma’am, do you know this man?” they asked.

The paramedics worked in circles and whisk High Noon’s body away.

“Any reason why he would be by this tree in a storm?”

“How long have you known him?”

“Where does he live? Can you give us a number where his family can be reached?”

“Is this man homeless?”

“It appears he may have been struck by lightning when the tree was hit. But where are the burns?”

“What time did you see him by the tree here ma’am? Ma’am?”

Jamal strolled up from out of nowhere. He was confused. I ran over to him to hug him around his waist. He grabbed my arms and shook me.

“What the hell happened here?”

“High Noon, no, Mr. Walter, he got struck and Nana Jo tried to save him and the

tree, it was moving and –”

“Crazy talk. Where’s Nana?”

“She’s somewhere, I don’t know.”

“Where?”

“Don’t you see, fool? She’s talking to the police. And it’s not crazy talk. But what would you know? You strut around with your butt on your shoulders all day long. You can’t see anything but what you want to see. Summer after summer and you’re still stupid as the first. Get out of my way, you make me sick, sick, sick!”

Jamal stood there for a moment, his eyes said sorry. He walked away looking around for Nana Jo. He left me standing on the side walk with my arms folded tightly across my chest. The mosquitoes nipped at my ankles while my eyes fought back tears I didn’t quite feel like I owned.

It was pie day again. Pie day because Nana Jo said so. The heat took a break and cool air breezed around. I sat at the opened window in the living room instead of the porch. Ms. Thomas and Mrs. Curtis both came to help Nana Jo. Their spirits worked up from the kitchen and flowed out into the foyer.

“See, this is the way I celebrate,” Nana Jo said, “You know, they’re fixing to let Walter on out of the hospital today.”

“You don’t say? Ain’t that something? I could hear that crackle of lightning clean down to my house and it almost knocked me out of my bed to be honest. Maybe it knocked some sense into old Walter. He’s lucky death didn’t come for him,” Ms. Thomas said.

“He wasn’t ready,” Nana Jo said.

“Well, Della helped him some with that. She must have known,” Mrs. Curtis said.

There was a short pause, and then a mess of laughter.

“Pretty tree Jo, maybe I need one. But then again I guess that’s what happens when you give things a name. They get nerve,” Ms. Thomas said.

Nana Jo laughed, “The man came to cut Della down early this morning and you should have seen the look on his face. Wasn’t a burn, lick or mark to claim Della was ever lit up by the sky. Some people just don’t believe in anything anymore.”

Their laughter tapered off. I propped my chin up on my hands and watched Della out the window. She was more beautiful than ever before. I wanted to tell her that I believed in her. That somehow Grandpa’s sister’s blood must have reached deep down in the earth to sprout such a thing up. From just a name.

“Come with me,” Jamal said, coming down the stairs while pulling a white t-shirt over his head.

“What? Where are you going?”

“Does it matter?”

I moved my lips to say something but nothing came out. I shrugged my shoulders and fished around for my shoes beneath the sofa. Jamal paused over the screen door and jingled the keys in his hand.

“Every single day that tree looks different. Can’t see how you sit all this time out with such company.”

It got in the front seat feeling kind of new away from my usual seat on the porch. Jamal backed out and turned the wheel. Fast Fannie came riding by skidding a turn with

her foot in the middle of the street. Jamal stepped on the brakes to shift gears.

“Hey! Where ya’ll going? Freda? Where-”

I started to roll down my window down and tell her we’d be right back; that maybe I’d even stay with her and sit on the porch for a while. Jamal started smirking and sped up a bit. The wind started to feel good against my face. I watched Fannie in the rear view mirror looking over her shoulder at Della while pushing her bike across the street heading straight back to Newtown.

MISSING

The sun pressed down on its forearms and leaned in hard. Heat found its way into the side windows of Pappy's rusted truck and hit me across the face and about my head. I was trying hard to hold back tears. They were boiling up behind the sockets of my red eyes. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry in his hell-hot truck. So I held on to it and tucked it in. Which made the sides of my chest hurt. I pressed my body against the passenger side door and watched the rows of cotton pass by in a blur.

Pappy turned his radio on to kill the silence. The music sounded way more soothing than the ruffling of air whipping around my ears. Every other turn the truck made I wanted to jump out and make a scene. Scream. Force him to listen to me. But it all be for no good because he was old and stuck in his ways.

"Hannah? You ain't talking yet, girl?" he asked, his cigar barely hanging from his loose lips.

"I'm fine," I said.

I stared at him from out the corner of my eye. He sat there at the wheel driving; looking pleased with himself. His wrinkled white t-shirt was bunched up around his belly. One hand balanced the steering wheel as he allowed his other hand, a nub, to dangle outside of the window.

"Can't be fine. You just tried to marry one of the Palmetto boys. So things can't be fine. Far from it."

"Yusef, his name is Yusef," I said.

"I'm your father. I know his name. I know everything. Like I said, one of those

Palmetto boys.”

Yusef was a Palmetto. There were enough of them spread around like peanut butter clean across Deep Creek County. Generations thick. I didn't try to marry him. I just figured I'd hitch a ride with one and get the hell out of dodge and into some faster living. Yusef was on his way to Virginia, and that certainly had to be a better place than this. But Pappy called himself having a winner's dream this morning and came down to Mr. MarKeith's Mart late in the evening to play some losing numbers. He was all over the case when he didn't see me at work. I knew he'd be that way. But I couldn't resist a chance at getting away, so I tried my hand at being slick just to see what it would feel like.

“You can't just hop on a bus and head out of town without speaking to your own father about it. Just not civilized is all. A bus? Them things are always turning over. Do you even know how long of a ride it is from Alabama to lord knows where? I promise you there's at least one serial killer in tow up there too. Just waiting to put their hands around a young girl's neck and peel her head. Damn, girl, I just saved your life,” he said.

I nodded my head up and down.

“I hear you Pappy,” I said.

I swore I saw fire shoot out from the rims of Pappy's truck when he pulled up at the bus terminal. He got out huffing and puffing, demanding to know my reasons for trying to leave home. I couldn't hurt him so I made one up. Yusef was good people and he didn't mind the trick. He was heading up to Virginia, he had relatives everywhere and he knew people. I didn't see any harm in wanting to go with him. I wanted to do something. Be something. But Pappy was convinced. My 19 years weren't enough to be

grown, Alabama had better schools anyway, and why would I leave him like my mama did and break his heart. That's what he said. That's what he always said.

To hear the townsfolk tell it, Mama disappeared away from here like a thief into the night. That's when Pappy had his accident and lost his hand. It was cut clean off. Something he hardly ever talked about. Even with only one good hand he was far from helpless. But the women around town made it their business to try and help him in ways they believed he needed. They fixed him meals he hardly touched, invited him to the church he claimed he would never set foot in, and kept a solid eye opened over me which he had down to a science.

Pappy was a charmer, a tall man with some looks left to him. Folks around here respected him enough. Two years ago he retired early from the warehouse right over the Florida state line with enough money to be called established. More importantly, he announced we would spend more time together. Move away from the ghosts of the past and try live to our lives in the present.

That's what his mouth said. I believed he meant it. But he was aiming too high. He wasn't ready to give up Mama's ghost.

I was five years old when she left. She kept up with Pappy at first. Dropped words here and there in letters she sent. Even called me sometime on birthdays and holidays. Her voice sounded light and distant. Like she was sorry for leaving us, but hesitant about ever coming back. Whenever Pappy would ask her where she was, she'd be vague and hint at ending the call. So Pappy stopped asking. She stopped calling. I reckoned she must have felt like I did now (trapped in the middle of nowhere with a traveler's mind). I

couldn't fault her for that. It was busting clean out of me. I just didn't know when I was going to leave.

I wanted to go to a big city and get lost in it. That's what we all said we'd do after graduation two Junes ago. Everybody was excited about their prospects. Folks called out relatives they'd go live with somewhere up north. I stayed silent, but hoped the entire time I was going somewhere too. Even attempted to put in a few college applications along the east coast to colleges I never heard of but liked the sound of the city or the numbers in the zip code. By July more than half of my peers were on their way, leaving Deep Creek in pairs off to college or into the military. Here I still was, hanging behind with Pappy.

His wrestling matches with his memories were preventing me from creating my own. There was no shaking Mama. Not like this. No matter how many pictures he took down she was all over him. Every blue moon things would play hard on his mind. Those nights he'd drink himself upside down in a bottle and strut in late from Ms. Mary's house, the town bootlegger. He'd fumble around in his room until he found his Bible, fished around through the pages for the one picture he put up for himself, and stare at her.

A picture of Mama dressed in a tight, brown summer dress linked arm in arm with Pappy. They were smiling real smiles. Not the forced kind with the tight clenched teeth that people took when they said "cheese" or "get money." They looked happy. In love. Pappy's mouth was opened as if he was saying something clever in her ear. Mama's hair was dark and curly with the sun bouncing off of her face. I had her eyes, dark and almond shaped. Her wrists were draped in brass bracelets. The kind that went "changalang" when she shifted her limbs. I remembered the sound. Her jewelry was always making a racket.

“Hannah, my sweet Hannah. You hatched out of an egg,” he said, when I checked in on him in the evenings.

“Must have been a giant egg,” I’d say, while moving around the room rotating the empty bottles out of his room.

By Wednesday night things were back to normal. Mr. MarKeith allowed me to keep my job. Nobody else was fixing to work into midnight hours like I did. Me and Smithy both held down the late shift.

“Boy oh boy did Pappy come in here angry over you,” Smithy said, greeting me at the counter.

I was happy to see his face. His brown eyes were smiling. We’d been friends since kindergarten. He wasn’t going anywhere either, but he didn’t want to. Smithy was one of those kinds of people who felt the world was everywhere and it didn’t make sense to go out chasing it.

“He had a dream. That’s why he came up here. A dream about some winning numbers,” I said, grabbing my smock and putting it on, “And didn’t play them either I bet, but hit the lottery big on my almost escape, huh? “

“Well shit. What were those numbers? Did they hit? They sound like a hit.”

“I don’t even know,” I said.

“Boy, telling from the slant on Pappy’s eyebrows, I’d say a cool 1-8-7,” he laughed, “Seriously, you couldn’t have really thought you were going anywhere though. Leave here without a trace? Not when your life prints are all over this county and deep in the dirt. You’re country Hannah and you will always be country. Just like a catfish will

always be a catfish no matter what kind of water you put it in.”

“I suppose.”

“Would you believe I’ve never been outside the state of Alabama?” he asked.

“Shit yeah, I bet you haven’t even been out of the county,” I laughed.

“Ain’t my point Hannah. My point is you don’t have to leave, to leave.”

“That’s some more of your philosophy shit to make the boondocks sound nice.

Not buying it, Smithy. I wanted to see what it felt like to go somewhere. Get down to the bus station and at least act like I was on my way. I knew it wouldn’t float. Stupid, huh?”

“I’m glad you said it and not me,” he said.

His eyes were tired at the corners. He started pulling on his hoody claiming he’d be in the back stocking up. His usual detour to take a nap while sitting on a stack of milk crates.

“You know, for real,” he said, pausing right before the freezer door, “I’ve been to Mississippi and a touch of Louisiana, but I’ve never had the thirst like you do to get out of here. Far as I’m concerned, the sky is blue, the water is full of catfish for days, and I don’t mind driving a ways to get to the places I got to go. Easy living.”

He nodded his head and made his way back into the cooler.

I was well into my shift chewing ice and counting flies when I spotted a dark figure bobbing around in the field of grass across the street. My heart hesitated and my eyes squinted to see; nothing but groupings of wild weeds misbehaving against the soft, summer breeze. I supposed.

Ms. Mary and all her stock lived over there. Right across the street in a slender

house propped right up on the dusty, red corner. Trees hid it a bit from the road.

Ms. Mary's place got more business than we ever did in the evening hours. Her porch was always heavy with traffic. Her liquor prices were more reasonable than the liquor stores in town and she allowed folks to keep their tabs running. Endless credit.

In the daylight hours her house was a pleasant tease. The warm colors pulled your eyes into its appeal. A dress of cool, Caribbean blue swallowed it up. Dark red shutters framed the windows. She had a garden on the side of her house overgrown with the wildest flowers reaching far into the sky. Under the sun they were beautiful, ridiculous colors, straight and proud. But at night they leaned over into a slump and moved together in waves that sometimes made it all seem that something over there was alive in the ground. Rising and falling like breath.

Which was partly Mr. MarKeith's fault. He needed to tame that mess over there. He owned the field next to Ms. Mary's. He claimed he was going to transform the overgrown patch into some type of fruit and vegetable market. He bought a new sprinkler system for the season to show he was serious. On long, hot evenings the sprinkler sang in a quick, ticking cadence making my thoughts dance around the rhythm. The constant tick-tick, pause followed by a long sputtering of water soothed me.

I leaned hard against the counter and propped my head up with my hands. Most nights nobody but town folks came through. They nickel and dined on flavored blunts, single cigs, and cheap condoms. I opened the doors wide and let the fans rotate around the short aisles. I was more awake than I wanted to be. I planted my behind on top of a high barstool behind the counter and paged through the road map I kept beneath the register. I'd been meaning to pay for it. But it was full of stains and wrinkles by now. Mr.

MarKeith wouldn't miss it. I kept a box cutter in the folds along with a purple pen. I marked off places I wanted to go.

Gravel started kicking up out in the small parking lot as headlights flashed into the windows of the store. I slid my contraband back under the register and yawned. I could hear the footsteps of somebody walking up. Heavy feet and big strides. A tall white man walked into the store. He was dress in some type of embroidered tie and expensive shirt that didn't wrinkle but creased with shiny folds around his elbows. His jeans were torn at the pockets.

"Am I lost? Or do I need to keep on driving?"

"Can I help you?" I asked, sliding down off of my stool.

"This place here, where exactly is this?"

"Alabama," I said.

"Alabama what? What before the Alabama?"

"This is Deep Creek. Deep Creek County. Where are you trying to get to?" I asked.

He made his way to the counter and pressed his body against the register as if he was holding himself up. His green eyes narrowed in on my name tag and then rested on my face. Traces of his strong cologne and liquored breath crept over the lottery spool and mingled in my nostrils.

"A place I can lay my head for this evening. The next day. And then the day after that," he said.

"No. Uh-uh. You'll have to get back on the main road for that," I said, "Right

back down this road, ten miles down the road going north, and then hit the highway.”

“That’s just it. I’m looking for lost. And you look honest. Are you honest?”

“I suppose,” I said.

“You suppose? Is there anyone else here as honest as you?”

I started playing with the map beneath the register feeling around for the box cutter. He looked like a talker; the way his mouth stayed moist around the lips.

“Maybe I can get my colleague, Smithy. Maybe he can help you. He’ll be able to tell you more,” I had to let him know I wasn’t alone.

“Aww, Baby. Don’t do that. Smith is it? Sounds like a liar already. I don’t trust folks with a last name for a first. That’s a born con. But tell you what. I’ll take a pack of Newport’s and be out your way.”

He rubbed his eyes and leaned back. He didn’t look like much harm. Just tipsy and lost. I wondered where he was from. The way his dark hair fell over the sides of his face and the beard gathering around his jaw. I guessed Texas. Nowhere near to where I wanted to be.

“Matches?”

“Naw, I got it, a man always carries a lighter.”

He pulled out one shaped in the shape of a pair of legs, one leg lifted up and out busted the flame. He lit up right there. I didn’t bother to tell him to stop. Not out here on this no-name road full of nothing but dark country and night air.

“There’s gotta be somewhere to stay here. Tish. Is that your name, Sweetheart? You’re a Tish?” he asked, running his eyes over my badge again.

I brushed my hand over the bubbled letters of the name I had chosen for the

evening. I felt like a Tish when I put it on.

“It is,” I lied.

He paused, “Well, I think it’s something else. Tell you what, ‘something-else’, you got a spare room laid out for me when you get off?”

“I don’t know you.”

“And I don’t know you. But see how I’m willing to trust you?”

“Can’t say that my father would appreciate it,” I said.

My insides began to flirt with butterflies of fear. I moved the box cutter into my back pocket.

“Oh, honey, I didn’t mean any harm. Can’t blame a man for finding an angel on a dark dirt road and trying to woo her a little,” he laughed, “A man needs some kid of salvation sometimes.”

“Umm hmm,” I was ready for him to leave.

He placed his money on the counter. His mind seemed to be a million miles away from making any sense, it was a set of twenties with hardly a tab of five dollars. He turned his head as another car pulled up onto the gravel. I felt relieved. Nobody but Ms. Mary came trotting in. Her wild eyes shifting around the store.

“Hey now. I’m here, I’m here! I figure now is just as good a time as any to come cash in. I know you got my tickets. You don’t mind, do you now?” she asked.

“Come on,” I said.

The strange white man took a break from our conversation and watched Ms. Mary mosey on in. He welcomed the distraction and put out his cigarette against the bottoms of his worn down boots.

“Oh, let me tell you. Triple sevens all the way child,” Ms. Mary said, “I had a dream about water coming from out the Gulf of Mexico and landing right in my front yard. The whole damn well of it. Slapped everyone standing right down into the water. Like a baptism. And then I knew it, triple sevens. Hit, hit, hit!”

“Yeah, but what about the people in your dream? Did they make it?” the stranger asked.

She paused for a moment and looked him over.

“Who are you?” she asked.

He put out his hand and greeted her, “Elijah. That’s what you can call me. Elijah.”

“Elijah, you say? Very interesting. Can’t say that anything ever happens to the people we dream about in a dream. I guess if I remember I think they turned into boats and started floating on the water. Isn’t that something? How the mind does that? Makes a way out of no way. Elijah, right? That’s what you said your name was, huh? Well let me tell you something about dreams, little miracles nobody ever listens to.”

She reached into her brown leather pocketbook and pulled out an old change purse. It was shaped like a clam with puckered silver lips at the top.

“And here you go Hanna, I’ll take money for this one. And this one right here, just give me more tickets.”

The white stranger, Elijah, tapped his hand on top of the counter to let me know he was right about my name. He placed a dirty five on top of the register and winked his eye.

“I’ll put in a good five on a couple of scratch-off tickets myself. Feeling kind of lucky standing here with you, Hannah, and you too ma’am,” he said, turning and nodding

his head at Ms. Mary.

“The name’s Ms. Mary. And you know what? You look mighty familiar. But can’t say that you’re from anywhere near here. Must be kin to somebody I do know or knew. Funny how strangers breeze into town with familiar faces,” she said, “I’m sure one is fixin’ to catch up with you sooner than later.”

He shifted around on his feet not allowing his eyes to quite catch hers. Ms. Mary knew how to spot a liar. Nobody just happened into Deep Creek.

“Do you know anybody renting out rooms?” he asked, placing his hand lightly on her back.

“For you? At this time of night? You’re better off sleeping on my lap. There’s nothing but a dirt maze to find a room this night. Unless of course you go on down to Lenny’s. If you’re leaving out now I reckon I can show you right to the spot. Right around the corner is all. But you can’t drive too far or you’ll end up in the neighborhood that pops up right out of the blue and then you’ll surely be lost.”

“Here you go,” I said to her, putting all of her money on the counter in twenties and laying out a row of tickets folded at the creases.

She quickly examined things and used one hand to sweep everything into her brown, leather bag.

“When you get off you be sure to come check on me now. No need for Pappy to rest his feet all night on my porch or trudging home on top of that ridiculous bicycle of his,” she said.

They both seemed to wag their heads at me as they started to leave. Elijah paused for a moment, he placed a twenty dollar bill on the counter, touched the side of my wrist

and winked his eye. I watched him closely as he got into his truck. The license plate said Louisiana. I scooted back atop my stool and stared out into the night. My ears found the ticking stutter of the sprinklers and I began to relax.

#

When we closed up at 3 o'clock I left Smithy to do all of the locking up and drove on down in Pappy's truck to Ms. Mary's house. Pappy didn't look like he was there. His bicycle was nowhere in sight. Her house was dark. The porch was dim and full of wind chimes hanging down from the post like dead men. They didn't move an inch.

I had to swing around and park in the back right by the side of the road which was a good distance away from her house. Her driveway was full of potholes, too many to count. I believed she kept it like that in order to control how folks approached her busy house. Although tonight it looked dead.

A loud knock rapped away at the front door. I poked around from the corner of the house but halted in my steps when the person started hollering.

"Ms. Mary! Open up! I know you're in there! Ms. Mary?"

The house was quiet. I sucked in my breath. I could hear my eyes move back and forth over his body as he stood there on the front porch. I recognized him; Felton Robinson from the hardware store he and his father owned in town. He was a decent man, the kind that fathers wanted their daughters to marry and make grandchildren with. Full faced-handsome; but looked frantic in this moment. His honey-brown skin sweated through his stiff shirt.

"Ms. Mary! Felton here, I need you Ms. Mary!"

I stared at him good and long until he turned around and looked in my direction. I placed my body flat against the siding and hoped he didn't see me. He stood there for a

minute until finally I heard the door creek open.

“Well, well, well. I can only imagine what has you up in the devil hours of the evening,” Ms. Mary said.

“I need her, Ms. Mary. I need her back. I can’t live without her. I need her back,” he said, slumping down into the rocking chair on her porch.

“There’s not an easy cure for these kinds of things, Felton. Why do you come to me. When you already know my way. Ain’t nothing to this old lady. Nothing you could possibly want my fixings with. Go on down to Ms. Josephine’s. She’ll put a hand to you just right. Tell you everything it is you need to know,” she said.

“Already been. Nothing she told me sounded much like anything I can do something about,” he said.

“No? So you want to ‘do’ something, huh? How much are you willing to give to have that power?” she asked.

Felton started crying. He wept into his nice shirt. I felt for him. He was sick with it.

“But what else is there to give?” he asked.

She reached down and touched his hand, then his arm, and his shoulder.

“I don’t believe I can do a full dose. I’m not the great Pappy. That’s a strong want in a man if he can let a limb go missing for love and still not have the one he wants. What kind of magic is that?”

I covered my mouth with my hand.

“Pappy being the exception. And we all know he doesn’t do as he’s told. Isn’t that how you men are? Bull-headed?”

“I don’t know. But I know a man’s heart and me, I want what I want,” Felton said.

Ms. Mary drew back her hand and slapped him across the face. He didn’t budge from the seat to retaliate. He sat there with his hands folded over his lap.

“I deserve that. I do. But she’s gotten into me and I’d do anything to have her. I can’t lie,” he was defeated.

Ms. Mary stood there as if she was bigger than what she looked. I studied the way her robe tented out at the ends like a cape and the moonlight reflected the purple and white stripes. She reached into the pocket of her robe and gave pulled out a long flower. It unrolled and dangled in her hand.

“See how my flowers bloom? Even after they’re dead? It’s all in what you put in the soil and how things brought forth from the ground,” she said.

“I suppose that’s where it is, huh? That’s where they all are.”

“Son, you’re not ready. You come here with more questions than answers. You want you want, but not looking at what you got. Wasting folk’s time.”

Ms. Mary took him by the forearm and told him to walk on over to the garden. He hesitated and stood his ground. He wasn’t ready, he agreed. Ms. Mary laughed and shook her head. She crossed her arms over her chest and sighed.

“That’s what I know. And you know what else? When you get good and ready, you do Ms. Mary a favor. Don’t ever come back over here again. Not even for a sip.”

She looked dead serious. Her hand still cupped the flower. Felton turned his back and started walking to his car parked somewhere in the front. Ms. Mary stood there until he drove off. I was waiting for her go back into the house so I could exhale. She kept

standing there as if there was something she was waiting for.

“Child, I can feel your eyes all over me. Come on from around there and get here on this porch.”

I came from out of my hiding space and stood with her in the moonlight.

“You told me to come by,” I offered up.

“I sure did.”

Pappy was home when I pulled up to the house. His bicycle was thrown across the yard like it was hung-over, just like him. He was asleep on the couch with his one good hand thrown across the coffee table. I slammed the door to let him know I was home. He was dead to the world and didn’t budge. I walked over and nudged him on his chest. He shifted around and mumbled something under his breath.

“How was work?” he asked.

I didn’t say anything, I didn’t have to. He was out of it, snoring again. I stared down at his face resting against the sofa pillow and placed my hand on his beard.

“Poor, Pappy,” I said.

His slumber gave me enough time to go searching in the basement for just the thing Ms. Mary said he had stored away somewhere. His hand was somewhere in an immoral glass jar. I wanted to see it for myself.

Five o’clock in the morning and I still didn’t find it.

“Where is it?” I asked, standing there with my hands on my hips. I jingled the car keys in my hand trying to wake him up.

“What-Where?”

“Your hand Pappy. Where is it?” I asked again.

He sat up now. Wide awake. His eyes bloodshot and his mouth dry.

“What you talking about now, Hannah?”

“Your hand.”

“What you need with it?” he asked, “And what’s with these kinds of question at this hour? Can’t a sleeping man be left to his dreams?”

He rubbed his eyes over with his hand and tried to change the subject.

“Anything interesting happen at work this evening? You didn’t try to steal away and marry up one of the customers now, did you?”

I got up and took a seat in front of him right on top of the coffee table. The bottles of liquor clinked together and rolled onto the floor. He tried to watch them roll over to the side of the wall but I put on hand on his shoulder and another on his nub and held my grip.

“Pappy, just tell it to me straight. What happened to your hand? Where is it?”

He shook me loose. Got up and walked around the perimeter of the sofa with his hand over his arm. He looked sad and guilty.

“Pappy, I know you hear me,” I said.

I fell back onto the couch in a slump. I felt defeated. 48 hours ago I could have been on a bus all the way to Virginia by now. Probably breathing in some of the air of the Chesapeake Bay.

I listened to Pappy’s slow footsteps as he disappeared into the basement. I almost dozed off sitting there waiting for him to come back. My thoughts blended together until

all I wanted to do was storm down there in the basement with him and demand the truth. My eye lids fluttered around a bit. I fought with myself to stay awake.

Pappy came back up the basement steps. His breathing was hard and labored. I could hear his feet dragging against the floor. There he stood in front of me with a jar in his one hand barely holding it straight. Inside liquid shifted around in little yellow swirls in and out the hot-dog sized fingers of a big, black hand. He slammed it down on the table and took a seat next to it.

“Here it is. Right here. This what you want to see?” Pappy said, in a whisper, “Have at it. You win.”

I couldn’t help but stare at it. Floating around in the jar like a pickled fruit. Minutes passed before we spoke. I finally picked up the courage to reach out for it. I turned it around and look at it up close. Such a young hand. Strong.

“You couldn’t put it in her garden, I guess?” I asked.

He put his hand in my lap and shook his head.

“Ms. Mary said you were supposed to put it in the garden.”

“I know what she says. She also said she’d keep secrets too. But I guess if your tab ain’t paid up, that goes out the door too, huh?”

“I paid her up for you, Pappy. It -”

“I can pay my own bills, Hannah. I’m a drunk, not a bum.”

“Why didn’t you put it in the garden?”

“Folks go because they want to go and they stay because they want to stay. It’s the ‘wanting’. Nothing can ever fix that. Ain’t a thing belonging to a woman or a man out in Ms. Mary’s yard that worked its way on everlasting. Everything eventually gives in to

our desires. You even know that.”

“Me?”

“Don’t play dumb with me now, girl. Now that you’ve got this much out of me. I know you want to leave. And it’s not that I don’t want you to, and I don’t, but more so I ain’t ready for you go and the world ain’t ready to receive you yet. Not when you plotting to make it out by the back door. You should be pushing to make it through the front. Not that I haven’t made it hard for you just that I know.”

Pappy said a mouthful in those few minutes than he ever said in a long while. I scooted myself up to the edge of the sofa seat and stared at my feet.

“What you want to do with it?” I asked.

“I guess I’ve kept it for so long. I don’t know what to do,” he said.

“Must have been in terrible way to do it in the first place.”

“I wish I could say I was drunk.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out an old photo. He spun it around with his finger until it rested right side up before me. The same photo as always. Him and mama together in happier times.

“Have it,” he said, “All of it. I’ll figure out what to do when I wake up.”

He sat there for a few more minutes and then made his way up the stairs into his room, slamming the door. I sat there for a good while watching the hand settle back down to the bottom of the jar. Pappy’s keys set right by it suggesting all kinds of remedies.

I grabbed both of them and headed out to his truck. The jar swished back and forth as I walked. The sun was up, making it all look more like a flesh weight inside of a

big, cheap jar with an even cheaper lid. It was Pappy's ghost.

Nothing about it said love. I turned around and walked back into the house.

SUGARMAN

Tonight the bar was alive. All the usual cards mingled about. Old Piano Joe was on the piano keys, Ms. Aida sang with her heart in her throat, and Talkin' Ted was at the bar running down a spell to Ms. Mary. Crowds of oiled brown and black skin moved throughout the room as cool air circulated down from wobbling ceiling fans. Lenny's lazy-ass air conditioner was on the blink again, but heat didn't stop folks from coming clear across town to this spot. Souls were soothed there, that's what the sign said. Somebody wrote next to it, "and sold here too."

It was a raggedy place just like Nana Jo said. Everything in it was old and worn down. Even the bathrooms looked like something from the sixties with one, lonely light bulb hanging in the middle of the ceiling with short toilet stalls and urinals that lined up against the wall. There was no white space, a million names were carved across anything your eyes could see. Where Lenny had tried to paint over things, but it only sank right down into the graffiti..

The thing about Lenny's though, the company wasn't half bad. It was still country as ever, but the boring was sucked up out of the air at Lenny's. We didn't have shit like this in Jersey. Not that I had ever seen. Folks went to clubs up north, but the kind that usually required a dude or two to stand by the door and bar folks like me out, under-aged and curious.

Lenny's didn't have that. As long as I didn't try to take a drink, Lenny's was cool. Even had a spot up close by the small stage where folks could dance, not that I was a dancing man at all, but that's where the women got up and did their thing.

“Good evening Lenny,” I said, taking a seat at the bar.

“I keep telling you son, you can’t just sit at my bar like this. What I’m supposed to do when the law comes in here and sees your young ass falling off the stool?”

“I’m good,” I said.

Lenny always said the same thing before he sent me out to run his errands. He motioned me over with his finger and told me to come over to the side of the bar in the back near where the stairs ran past the small pool room.

“Seriously, son, you’re going to have to start keeping it to the back in the pool room. I can’t have you at the bar, my friend. I don’t have many valid licenses, but hell this liquor one is the main one I’d like to keep. So if anything, mingle around near the other folks. Blend in. You don’t look a day older than 21. Which means you ain’t nothing but 17. You hear me?”

“18,” I said, “I’m 18, Lenny.”

He just shook his head and patted me on my shoulder.

“Now take this on up to Sug,” he said, handing me a large yellow envelope, “You know, the white boy in the last room at the top of the stairs. Tell him it came for him today.”

He put some money in my palm and left me standing there with the envelope in my hand. Women walked by into the small room making themselves comfortable here and there. Their hands sat on their hips like teapots. I started to drift over into their direction, at least speak for a moment or two until Lenny yelled from the bar in the other room for me to hurry up.

The steps were narrow. I had to take my time in order to make sure I didn't fall and bust my ass. The more I walked, the uglier it got. The walls were all covered with dated, paneled wood. Dracula-like sconces lead into a long hallway. How Lenny got tenants up here was just amazing to me. But then again, folks were always on hard times coming by Lenny's. It was like the last stop before total failure.

There were a row of rooms to the right and left. The first door was wide-opened with a woman getting dressed before a long dirty mirror. She was reaching around her back trying to straighten out her bra while her panties gathered at the bunches in butt. She saw me looking and grinning and motioned for me to come over.

"You come here and get this for me," she said.

"I'll be right back," I lied.

That's how folks got set up back home. A woman never needed help in getting dressed far as I was concerned. Damn hookers could put on a prom dress in the dark blindfolded. She smacked her lips together and gave me the finger as I kept walking.

The last door was at the far end where there was even less light. Looked like somebody was already down there knocking at his door. He lit up a cigarette as I approached, one of those long, lady sticks, the light from his matches made his skin glow. He had one of those upside down triangular faces with women features.

"Evening," he said.

"Sup?" I said, nodding my head.

"I don't think our friend is home," he said, taking his one hand and placing it inside of his suit pocket.

I needed more light to check the dude out. But from what I could see he was laid

out in a light colored suit and what looked like red shoes on his feet. He was tall as shit too, with long, skinny arms and legs. Even I could tell he wasn't from around here, but he acted like his shit was normal.

"Iono, you got a message for him you want me to leave?" I asked.

"I reckon I do. But seeing as how I'm only in town briefly, I just might want to deliver this one to him myself."

He did some strange gestures with his hands and for a moment, brought them back and forth like a Praying Mantis, I felt uncomfortable talking to his ass. I started to turn around and leave, but he reached down and put his cigarette out with the tip of his shoe and said he'd be going downstairs and waiting. I watched him walk away. He took his time getting down the hall and made sure to stop at the lady's opened door and stare.

"You want something?" I heard the lady ask.

He nodded his head and then turned and looked at me as if he was making sure I was watching. He turned and walked in slowly and closed the door behind him. I saw the light under the door go from dim to black. I shook my head and knocked on the white boy's door one more time. I wasn't scared, but I was getting antsy waiting up there so I started to walk away until the white boy's door started to jiggle at the handle.

"What you want?" he asked, poking his out from the door.

His voice was scratchy, like he'd been sleeping. I handed him the oversized envelope and started to leave.

"What's this?"

"Lenny sent me up here to give that to you," I said.

His eyebrows scrunched up into his temples like he didn't know what I was

talking about.

“Look man, Iono, but some funny looking dude with an off color suit was just over here looking for you,” I said.

“Who?”

I shook my head and started walking back down the hallway. I didn’t want to be an innocent bystander messing this far into grown folks shit, they always get fucked up.

Downstairs the atmosphere felt safe and the party was just getting started. I blended myself right on to a table full of women. They were smiling and clinking glasses. I kept an eye out for Lenny. After a while the white dude came out near my table looking more sober than when I left him.

“You, kid, come here,” he said over the music.

“Who you talking to?” I asked, turning around.

The ladies smiled at me and made a way for me to get out my seat. I was irritated to have to give up probably the best seat in the house.

“Yeah, come here, I just want to talk to you,” he said.

I nodded my head and we started walking outside when white, red-headed Renie came breezing over and blocked us from the door. She was drunk.

“Hey now stranger,” she said, hugging up on him.

I wanted to go back and sit down, but a woman had stepped in already and took my seat. Renie hung off the white man’s one arm and with the other he told me to come on, follow them into one of the corner booths on the other side of the bar. I don’t even know why I followed, but I did. I was looking out for Lenny.

“What’s up? What you want with me? I asked when we finally sat down,
He started to speak, but Renie was ready, “Evening,” she said, catching eyes with me.

“Town offered her up to me like a fresh cherry out of a deep jar. Small towns have a terrible way of assuming what a woman is and what it was a man likes. You know what I’m saying? I’m not one to spit on an offer, but hell, what can I do man?”

He was talking like Renie wasn’t even there beside him, which she probably really wasn’t. She looked checked out already. He was also speaking to me like we had grown up together. I could look in his eyes and see that he was wild, probably a con man of some sort.

“I mean, what’s this about? I don’t know you,” I said, leaning in and making sure he heard me.

“Where you getting to later?” Renie asked, him.

“Not too far.”

“Hmmm,” she said, “shame cause I was sure hoping to see you later.”

“I’ll be around.”

“I’ll be ‘round,” she mocked, “You go to work and you go home. I don’t see you none, but here at Lenny’s piece of shit shack and you don’t even stay long. Don’t know too many men like you. Work and home. I need me a man like that.”

“What you drinking tonight, Renie?” I asked.

“Well hell man, you know I always drink rum. I’m a lady and ladies drink rum. Or have you forgotten, Sug?”

“Rum? Have it up for the night, and I’ll take care of it on my tab,” he said.

Renie couldn't get to the bar quick enough.

"Now, you. Who are you?" he asked.

"Who me? If you asking about that envelope, that's not me, that's Lenny. You're gonna want to see my man Lenny about that," I said.

"No, no. I'm not trying to ask you about that envelope. Just upstairs, you were saying something. Some dude was looking for me?"

He did his eye thing again, making me laugh, because right there, I knew he had to be lying about something. The way the strange dude looked from upstairs, I thought I would care too. Wasn't the kind of face that came calling on normal folks.

"And oh, please forgive me. I'm Elijah," he said, offering up his hand for me to clasp with.

I ignored it and started to get up.

"Yeah, like I said. Lenny just said come up there and give that to Sug, I mean you. And dude was up there tapping away on your door for a minute," I said.

"Yeah they call me Sug, around here. I'm not too keen on it myself. But after you left, somebody came and slipped a card underneath my door. Just weird is all. You know what he looked like?"

He didn't have to worry, I wasn't ever going to call him Sugarman or Sugar anything. Country nicknames weren't my style at all.

"He was strange looking. He was wearing a light colored suit and a pair of red shoes, you can't miss that."

"Did he say what he wanted?"

"Naw," I said, "Definitely looking for you though."

He tapped his fingers against the table and looked me over, his one eye looked overly concerned. Ms. Mary made her way over to the table and I took my cue to slide over to the other table and sit.

“Humph, now isn’t that something,” Ms. Mary said, “since you paying for her drink why don’t you knock something off her tab with me?”

“Can’t stretch my wallet that far,” he laughed.

“She’d put good Christian people like me out of business if I ain’t cut her off after all her promises to pay. She’d drink my stock dry if she could,” she said. Ms. Mary didn’t (bootlegger yes, liar no). Her house sat around the corner across from Lenny’s. Her wooden porch dipped deep and creaked loud with the comings and goings of veteran drinkers who frequented her stock in the day.

“I hear you,” Sug said.

“No, you don’t hear me. Good thing I have good old’ Ted here to keep me company in the day. He hears me alright. He knows that Renie has a tab something terrible and she won’t even bother to put a dent in it yet. Tell him Ted.”

“Woman I don’t care about that dang trash! Tell her so Sugarman...obviously you don’t care too much for her either. Do you now, boy? Seems to me your interests lie elsewhere,” he said.

Ms. Mary narrowed her eyes in on him and shook her head. She started to say something until she looked over at me sitting at the other booth and then looked back at Sug.

“And what’s this? What you doing in this dump? You Ms. Jo’s boy, huh? Grandson, I mean. I know this is a far cry from home on Orchid tonight. I knew I saw

Jo's big hog out there in the parking lot. I'd say you're a long way from home now boy," she said.

"Oh, you some kin to Josephine?" Ted asked.

"That's what I said already, man. We got us a royal, pure-blooded Deep Creek kin right in our company tonight, gentlemen," Ms. Mary smiled.

This was the trouble Nana Jo was probably talking about. Nothing sounded right coming from their mouths. I told them I'd be right back and found my way back to the front of the bar.

"Man looking for you. You did what I asked you to do, right? Yeah, well that man over there, he's looking for you son," Lenny said, pointing into the crowd.

I looked into the crowd and spotted the man from upstairs. He strolled over in his light colored suit, and his tacky red shoes. He walked over to the bar with two drinks in his hand wearing a triangular smile.

"Who are you looking for?" I asked the clean stranger.

He leaned in with his pointy chin. His mustache was combed up on either side like some jester on the face of a wild card. The music stopped playing, at least in my ears. The laughter and talk died down to soft banter. He paused for a moment and laid the drinks on the edge of Lenny's old rounded bar. He laughed, but no sound came out of his mouth.

"Elijah," he smiled, "you were over there talking to the Elijah Geddes I have been looking for, weren't you?"

"I can't tell who's who in this bar tonight," I said.

“I know. People have a way of being more familiar with faces than names. Why don’t we go outside and discuss this, seeing as I can’t hear myself think in here.”

Nana Jo would be disappointed, I was already caught up in some bullshit. I knew enough that I wasn’t going outside with some androgynous stranger dressed in fine linens. The entire scene was making me sorry I’d ever set foot into Lenny’s in the damn first place.

“I’m good right here,” I said, “I don’t think you have business with me anyway. Didn’t you say you needed to speak with Elijah? None of my names are Elijah. But I hope you find who you looking for.”

He stared at me for a minute and then drank both of the drinks he had set on top of the bar. I stared down at his hands, the same way Nana Jo did people so many times in that stupid back room of hers on the porch. His palm was holding on to his glass. I couldn’t tell heaven from hell across it, but he felt like trouble, a whole lot of it. Maybe that’s what Nana Jo felt about people. He saw me staring and turned his palms downward and pressed his fingers hard on the bar.

“You just tell him, when you see him, I’m looking for him,” he grinned.

He was repeating himself, like I was a child. Either that, or he was trying to set me up. I walked outside to the parking lot after that. I tried not to look like I was running. But once out I didn’t care. The night felt good and I hustled over to Nana Jo’s car parked right under the light.

“Hey, Jamal is it? Wait up!”

Sug came running out of the bar behind me. Under the light outside he didn’t look

too scraggly as he did inside.

“Look, I don’t have shit to do with whatever you got going on in there,” I said.

“What you talking about?” he asked.

“You got some man in there fresh on your ass. I don’t want no trouble,” I admitted.

“I don’t know what trouble you had to go through tonight, but here, I’m sorry you got crossed up.”

He placed three twenties in the palm of my hand. I took them and still fished around for the keys in my pocket, I was ready to go. He took out a cigar and stood there. I turned around for a moment to open the door and in the next instant, the tall stranger was there behind me.

“Here you are,” he said.

Sug leaned against Nana Jo’s car as if he were expecting the confrontation.

“I’m glad I finally caught up with you, Elijah. My name be Moses. I’m a collector. It seems you have something or some things that need collecting,” he smiled.

“And you, young man,” he said, turning to me, “Do tell your Nana Jo I’d love to call on her one of these days. I miss her coming out here like she did in the old days. Shame it can’t be like it once was.”

I tried to open my door to get into the car, but the man stood in such a way that made it clumsy to do. He and Sug were going back and forth while my mind ran a mile a minute to see how things had been fixed.

“Who sent you out here, coming to ask about me?” Sug asked.

“No, no, nobody sends me,” he laughed, “you called me.”

“I didn’t call you.”

“Yes you did. You called me just as clear as day. Seeing as how it’s you who has what needs collecting and it’s me who must do it.”

“You’re riddling me, sir. Moses is it? You’re trying to wrap me up in something and I’m thinking you have the wrong Geddes,” Sug said.

“Riddling? Trying? Thinking? Don’t make it long and hard now. And don’t worry, I won’t take it from you. Things like this only work when you give them to me. Let me go ahead and remove the items, from your, eh, hands. I know how these things may seem; delicate and all. Don’t worry, no one will know. Just you of course, and myself. It will do you a world of good. I’m telling you the truth. It will do you a world of good.”

“Like I said, I didn’t call you and you have no business with me.”

“Nope. You’ll come around white boy, or is it Sugarman? Is that what they call you here? My brother... Sugarman from good old Sugarland, Louisiana. Oh, I know all about you. Sweet Daddy with the blazing white skin. Good stuff, Sug. A nickname means folk around here accept you into their fold. Shame they don’t know what you’ve been hiding.”

“Fuck these riddles and fuck you,” Sug said.

I was tired of it, all of it. Sugar, collections, Lenny’s, damn it all, I wanted to hit the road. I finally opened my car door knowing the man would try to reach inside or grab me somehow. I was ready for him and pushed his ass down. He only laughed as he fell on top of the dusty clay. A laugh that seem to rise up off his chest and float into the air. I got angry just listening to it. Instead of getting inside the car I walked over to him and

stepped on his wrist, so he could unclench his hand, I wanted to see it as clearly as I could. Not that I knew what to look for or what I was doing, but I wanted to see. He was taking pains to put me into the equation, so he had something to tell.

“What does it say, son?” he asked.

“You know damn well what it says,” I said, “Moses is it? Well, there ain’t shit you’ll be collecting tonight but an ass whooping.”

He laughed some more. I turned to go towards the car and he grabbed my foot, making me kneel down in the dirt next to him. Sug came over and kicked him in the face, making the man laugh even harder, sweat started popping up across his forehead. His grip reached up to my forearm. I fell down, he rolled on top of me and started to choke me, with a smile plastered across his face. I started to reach for his hand, but then his eyes, they were dancing around the pupils. I saw Sug in the background trying to pull him off of me, but the man was solid. The more I laid there, the more his eyes danced and the tighter his hand grew around my neck. I closed my eyes and thought about Nana Jo, what she would do in this instant. Not much a palm reader could do when the palms were against their throat. But then my body split in half, my hands pushed the joker off of me and rolled him over, straight onto his back. It was me, but it wasn’t me. Sug helped me stand up.

“What the fuck did you do and how in the hell did you do it?” he asked.

I didn’t know my damn self so I just stood there. The man laid there looking a little dazed, but still smiling.

Headlights pulled up right behind us and a woman got out, running towards us.

“Cuz, is that you? What are you doing out here? And what the hell is going on?”

It was Anitra's nosey ass, but I was glad to see her. The tall stranger got up and dusted himself off. Sug came over and stood in between us.

"Looks like Josephine taught you well, son. Please, give her my regards. I'd come by and visit, but I'm afraid she doesn't want my kind of company," he said.

"You be gone now," Anitra said, "Go on to your car and get from around here."

"Just call me when you finally come around. I won't beg and I don't bite," he said, placing his business card in Sug's hand.

The three of us just stood there and watched him make tracks to his car which sat apart from the others. He still looked clean, not a speck of dirt on the thread of his suit.

"I'm going back into the bar," Sug said, turning to me, "You coming?"

I looked over at Lenny's, the building looked a shade darker than when I had entered it earlier. I didn't understand half of what was going on and in the back of my mind all I could think of was Lenny. The money he'd been greasing my palm with burned in my pocket. I felt like a full-fledged, fool. Seemed like I bought into my own set-up. Tied into some mess when I could have been home sitting down on the front porch with Nana Jo and my little sister doing absolutely nothing.

"Lenny's no good," I said aloud.

"What? You just rolled around in the dirt and you get up with this?" Sug said.

"I don't know what's going on," Anitra chimed in, "But lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice. First old, white man drops dead at Lenny's, now this."

"Old white man?" I asked.

We turned around and looked at Sug.

“Nothing about him is true,” I said.

“Cutter, that was the man’s nickname. He some kin to you? Seeing as how we don’t get very many white out-of-towners here no way. What business you have here in Deep Creek anyway?”

“Let’s go on back inside,” he said.

I wanted to leave, but Anitra motioned to come with her. She parked her car next to Nana Jo’s and we all walked back into the bar together.

Anitra walked in first. She was tall like Nana Jo, but with more meat on her bones. She didn’t mind getting into people’s business or their faces, just like her mother. The men and women stared at her, surprised to see her in here on such a night.

“Problem?” Lenny asked, taking an arm at the bar as we sat down, his face looked troubled.

“What’s going on Lenny?” Anitra asked straight away.

Lenny looked at me first and then Sug. All this time I thought he was good people.

“Let’s go on outside,” Lenny suggested.

“Just came from outside, why don’t you take us into your office in the back,” Anitra suggested.

Anitra didn’t have to ask him twice. We walked back there. He told us to have a seat but I didn’t feel like sitting. Sug sank in the chair closest to the door and Anitra sat at the chair behind the desk and crossed her long legs.

“What’s this all about?” Lenny asked.

“Dead, strange man on your floor a few months ago, new one you renting out a room to, and now a tall one just tried to strangle my cousin out in the parking lot. I’d say a whole lot is going on, Lenny.”

“Ain’t much to it, Anitra. Folks come and go so much from here, I can’t keep record as to the cause,” he said.

He took a seat on his desk and looked over at Sug and me. His hands rested across his chest as he folded his arms. He was lying.

“Was man who died, was he related to you?” I asked Sug, I knew everybody else wanted to ask it.

“Why would he be related to me? Because he was white?”

That’s all I knew about the dead man, he was white and up in age. Not very many white faces hung around Lenny’s though. And here was one in town right after the other.

“Basically,” I said.

Sug laughed and shifted his weight in his chair. Lenny stood up and shook his head as if he was innocent.

“A modern day whodunit, huh? I’ll tell you what, I got business to tend to, you all sit right here and try to figure it out.”

I didn’t want to go home to Nana Jo’s house yet. I followed Anitra to her place not far from Lenny’s to get my mind straight. Hers was a quiet, cozy bungalow, the first on a long street of small houses. A car was already in her driveway when we pulled up. I parked alongside the street in front of her house and got out. Looked like Anitra’s mother, dressed up for trouble.

“Couldn’t take it any longer, my hand was itching up a storm,” she said.

“Ma’am, you never fail me to amaze me,” Anitra said, taking up my hand and pushing me over to her mother.

“Long time no see, Jamal. How’s my sister? And *your* sister?”

“Fine, they’re both fine,” I said.

“So what’s the trouble going on this evening? I know there’s plenty of it. Put on my fine threads tonight just to come out and check it out,” she said.

Anitra opened her door and told me to make myself at home while she ran down every last detail to her mother. I rested on her couch watching their shadows dance across the wall as they gestured with their hands with every key piece of information.

Her brown walls were calming. Everything looked so new and untouched. I caught an eyeful of masked African men hanging on shelves, African dolls dressed in fine cloth, and black portraits lining the surface of her sofa table. They whispered amongst themselves and laughed at me, at my trying to be a man on this night.

“You want something to drink?” they asked, breaking from their conversation and turning on every other light in the house..

“No, I’m good,” I said.

There was a faint knock at the door. They both turned to me and told me to go get it. It was Nana Jo, her wide eyes slapped me first and then her hands reached out to hug me.

“Oh, Jo, the boy’s alright,” Anitra’s mother said.

“How would you know, Bernie? Got your daughter around town interrogating folks. You don’t send youngsters to handle these affairs,” Nana Jo said.

“How’d you get here?” I asked.

I wished I wouldn’t have done that. Everybody got quiet and looked over to the door. A woman walked in, looked just like Nana Jo and Aunt Bernadette all rolled into one, but younger. Her hair rolled down her back, her eyes bigger and wider. She wore a long summer dress with her feet in boots it didn’t seem she knew how to walk in.

“How’d you get her out of the house?” Aunt Bernadette asked.

“Jamal, you wrestled with him tonight? Didn’t you? I can see all over your face. It’s going to stay with you for a while. Some of your Nana Jo you got in you, whether you like it or not. And Anitra, brought this for you, I can’t bring it inside for you unless you want it,” she said, “placing a glass jar down right on the outside of the house. Hello Bernie. Good to see you too. Shall we go?”

Nana Jo drove her own car with me in the driver seat. She didn’t say a word to me other than to be good and stay in the car. They rolled up in the back of Lenny’s and got out, whispering to one another like witches making a brew.

The strange one led, taking her boots off and setting them by the door.

“Let’s get out,” Anitra suggested.

“They said stay in here.”

We jumped out of the car at the same time and ran across the gravel to get a look. Our arms resting across each other’s back.

“Shh!” she said.

They surrounded Lenny, the three of them, towered over him. His toothpick fell

out of his mouth and onto the floor.

“Call him,” Nana Jo said.

I didn’t know who ‘him’ was, but down the stairs came Sug, he took a seat at the bar and Lenny wedged himself in behind him.

“You’ve been working right with him,” Nana Jo said to Lenny, taking his hand and slapping it on top of the bar.

“I have debts too,” Lenny said, “Everything can’t go unpaid.”

“I knew it!” Aunt Bernadette hollered, “You don’t let loose of a dollar for nothing.”

“I didn’t know the old man was going to come to any harm. I figured I was just returning a favor for a debt,” Lenny said.

“You knew better,” Nana Jo said.

“Now he’s here and running loose, Leonard. All these years you’ve lived here, you know Deep Creek like the back of your hand. What are we going to do to push him out of here? You invited him in by doing his bidding, whether you knew it or not, and now you have a double debt,” the one they called ‘Middle’ said.

“You are going to have to call him back here. However you can get him here, and I’m going to have to fix everything he touched.”

Nana Jo let loose of Lenny’s hand. He grabbed his wrist and rubbed it. Sug sat there looking confused and caught up.

“I just wanted somewhere to lay my head. I swear, I didn’t know the man was kin to me ‘til I got here,” he said.

“There are a lot of things you don’t know, but will soon find out,” Middle said,

“And you can try to leave, but it will still bring you back, until we drive him out of here.”

“Who is ‘him’?” Sug asked.

“That’s what I’m saying. Who is ‘him’?” she whispered.

Nobody answered and instead looked at Lenny. Sug started standing up and laughing.

“I mean, the dude was a little uncanny. But a devil at the fork in the road he ain’t. Unless that’s what you all are trying to say. And if it is, you a little further south than I originally thought,” he said.

“These kinds of things happen here, Elijah. After all, the dead one that fell must have had something he wanted in the first place in order to fix Lenny’s mind to invite him in. But that’s all done with now. We’ll see to it,” Middle said, and then turned to Lenny, “You go it, get whatever it is he wants, and you bring it here.”

Lenny went in the back and came back with a small box. The three sisters closed in together and looked. From where Anitra and I stood, we couldn’t see a damn thing. Sug reached in and picked whatever it was up.

“This belonged to my mother.”

That’s when she took it, the one they called middle, and placed it in side a small glass jar.

THE JAR LADY

Orlando saw her on his off days which routinely landed on Thursday. She lived on Camellia Street in a two-story, colonial house. It was dull and ugly with cream-colored stucco for its dress. Dark, green vines climbed up the left side of the house wrapping themselves around the chimney in a gentle choke-hold as the slack crept over and spilled onto the roof.

“It’s as if it wants to hold you for a little while,” his wife, Tippy, said, when they first moved into the neighborhood and happened to drive past the strange house on the hidden back street.

“Damn ghost magnet if you ask me,” Orlando laughed, “Maybe we should send your mother over there and see if their hiring.”

“Funny,” Tippy said, “Though I would never joke about the dead.”

She didn’t pay him much mind, she was too busy falling in love with the old house. It stood there alone on a lonely street away from the other homes that populated their new neighborhood, their own brick rancher all the way on the other side.

“I want to get a picture of it O. Let me get my camera out the back and take a picture. You don’t have anywhere to go.”

He stopped the car as a frown sunk into his face. Tippy reached over and popped the trunk. Her stuff was everywhere. Crowded in the back seat, the glove compartment, the trunk. She got out of the car and rummaged through the back.

“Where’s my camera, O? I know I had it in here. Did you move it? Where in the devil is my camera?”

He rolled his eyes and gripped his hands on the steering wheel.

“If you didn’t keep so much junk back there maybe you could find things!” he yelled.

She found it and slammed the trunk back down. Her feet edged over to the soft part of the grass to get a good angle on the house. Orlando opened the car door and got out. He stood there patiently while she continued to snap away. The windows of the house were crowded with white curtains breathing in and out when the breeze picked up. He noticed a small figure standing by the front window on the first floor when the wind subsided. A shadow, he thought.

“This is what folks move down here for, you know, to the south. Some of the houses here are beautiful. They give you something to think about, it’s like they tell you a story,” Tippy said, chattering on.

“Yeah, baby, we had this back home, it’s called the historical district. Come on, let’s go. Besides, I think I just saw somebody looking outside the window at us. Probably not used to nosey folks poking around like this.”

“One more,” she said, “I have to get the trees.”

“Da’ hell? How did you miss them the first time, Tip? The trees are right there, damn near inside of the house. You need to come on, it’s getting a little dark out and I promise you this place is probably secluded over here for a reason. Besides, isn’t this usually the part when the curious white folks get killed for messing around in other folks stuff?”

“We’re ain’t white O.”

Orlando was right, the house was isolated on Camellia Street for a reason. Even most newcomers knew enough to keep away from the place upon seeing it only once. The rickety abode had an appeal that whispered, “Stay away.”

But it caught Tippy’s eye. Fresh from Indiana, her and her husband weren’t quite used to the ways of the clay roads of Alabama, not yet. When they got lost they took it in stride and let the scenic routes make them feel good about their relocation choice. They didn’t know anybody in Alabama. Matter of fact, Tippy had never been this far south since she was born in the back shed of an old house in Texas. Her mother gave her up for adoption after that and she ended up in a foster home in Chicago where she made her own way up from there.

Orlando hadn’t been this way since he was in the military. Alabama was his idea. Made his money stretch, he said. Something his money needed plenty of. Additionally, he knew he was married to a woman who liked nice things, and nice things cost money.

They didn’t have any children, just their love for one another. They took that and packed everything up and set up shop in the center of town, a copy shop. Something Orlando always wanted to do. He was happy to leave behind his insurance job in the city where he had grown tired of being a worker bee. He knew the money was good, but the currency he favored most was time, something his wife Tippy always seemed to have an excess of.

Tippy, or rather, Willamena, didn’t have to work, but she did (part-time). She had a way of collecting things and those things always had a way or another of panning out for her. Folks had longed called her Tippy-Toes because that’s how she walked, on the tips of her toes around chaos and catastrophe. Mainly two situations she often caused

because she hoarded things, pretty things, old things, anything really.

When she and Orlando met she was in the habit of collecting insurance claims that benefited her pocket. Not insurance fraud per se, but she had a way of exaggerating things on her application. Orlando worked in underwriting and he caught it. She came up to his office with more excuses than a little bit and after explaining her intentions and her version of the story, the insurance company let her off the hook. That's when Orlando put her on his. He fell in love with her almost immediately.

But they were happy to find love at 50, Orlando's second marriage, Tippy's fifth, no children on either side. Orlando saw their union as a way to move forward on his dreams of a new life. He didn't count on Tippy's bad habits following them. Though he figured he should have known.

"Honey, have you seen my camera case?" Tippy asked.

They were home now. Her husband tucked away into his only piece of solitude so far in the house.

"Nope."

"You sure? I need it."

"I'm sure."

"Maybe I dropped out there on the street. I need it O."

"Cameras really don't need cases no more than cars need bras, Tip. Just a fancy thing they make people think they need."

"I need it," she said, putting her hands on her hips.

"I'll check on it during lunchtime tomorrow."

The street was a bit more inviting today. He hesitated making the full turn but did so anyway when thinking about Tippy's insistence. He pulled aside of the road and circled the area he believed they were at.

"Nothing," he said, "Not a damn thing."

He looked up and noticed the owner's car rolled out of the driveway and parked itself onto the curb on one particular Thursday, Orlando didn't resist. He parked his car on the side of the street and knocked on the door like a good neighbor.

She answered. She was younger than he had assumed, 30 maybe, and beautiful. Her long, white summer dress flowed down to the tips of her toes. It was loose in the front, interrupted by her long black hair spilling over her head in buckets.

"Your...your car, it's in the street."

She smiled and left him standing there confused until she returned with the keys and asked, no told him, to move it back into the driveway himself. His curiosity was big and she was pretty enough. He started to leave her key in her mailbox but she stood in the doorway and waited for him.

"Come in, tea?"

He didn't have a chance to say no. Not that he wanted to say no to her. He didn't really drink tea.

"Lemon?"

Orlando stepped into her house and on top of her pine floors. His eyes darted all over the place. The walls were draped in pink wall paper, it was everywhere. The windows stood heavy in high curtains which brushed the surface of the floor. A velvet

Victorian sofa sat in the living room near the window. He sat on it and listened to the silence.

“That car just sometimes has a mind of its own.”

She placed a small cup and saucer in his hand, slices of lemon on the side.

“Thanks. But the car...you’re probably gonna need to put the emergency brakes on. You know, the emergency brakes?”

She laughed in a cackling manner and it startled him. He hadn’t said anything funny. Was she laughing at him? At his words? Why such a strange laugh from such a pretty face?

“Oh no dear, I’m not laughing at you! It’s just that I put the emergency brakes on that old thing all the time. It never seems to work. I’d get a new car, but I’m fixing my house up you see. I’m always doing things to my house.”

He relaxed a bit and looked up at the ceiling. The white crown molding chased itself around the room and broke up the shades of pink. Too much pink, even for a woman, he thought.

“I know, I’m drowning in shades of mauve, but I do love it.”

She sat down next to him. Close enough for question. She looked directly into his eyes, the way that most people considered rude. Orlando didn’t move a budge. He let her look into his eyes. Her face was calm and comfortable.

“Well, thanks for the tea...”

He started to get up from the sofa, but she reached over and kissed him. Her hand held on tight to the back of his neck. The kiss tasted good to him, felt good to be wanted. He started to think he was dreaming. Been years since he had that sort of effect on a

woman, months since he could do that to his own wife. He felt vulnerable to the offer before him. She introduced him into her bedroom cluttered about with bulky furniture and mirrors.

“Everything matches,” he blurted out, laughing a bit to himself.

“What?”

He shook his head and glanced over the room thinking he had gone mad in the moment. He thought about the hideous bedroom-in-a-bag ensembles he knew women liked to buy, signs of a psychotic nature to want to match everything. Everything, he thought, didn’t need to be matched.

“I think I better go. I just wanted to help you with your car. I don’t even know your name.”

“Middle, you can just call me Ms. Middle.”

“Thank you, for the tea I mean,” he said.

Next Thursday came and the car rolled out into the street again. Orlando thought it almost to be a trap. He hadn’t planned to go down that street that day, but he was curious. Mostly about the woman in the house. He started to go up to her door and tell her, but he paused, thinking of her pink walls and her matching sets, he had enough problems of his own.

The car door was unlocked and he shifted the gear into neutral on the old thing and pushed it back into the driveway.

“I think I better call the people to come tow this old thing away,” she said, standing by him when he got out of the car.

She looked different to him, taller somehow, and more wide-eyed. He started walking backwards and giving excuses.

“Yeah, I was just in the neighborhood and I couldn’t just let it sit there in the middle of the street.”

“Usually when it rolls, it just rests on the side of the road. No one really drives down this way.”

“I noticed that, your house looks like the oldest out here on this lone street. Was it always like this?” he asked.

She shook her head yes.

“My parents’ owned this house. My daddy built it. None of the old houses standing here anymore because nobody wanted to keep them up. Old folks passed on from here and the other ones sold their properties back to the bank. ”

“You sound like you can be the town historian,” he smiled.

“I probably am the town historian.”

“I bet you have plenty of stories,” he said.

She rolled her big eyes over twice making Orlando feel uneasy. She was just too weird acting and looking, he thought, just like her house. But he sensed she was trying her best to nice to him, friendly. He imagined there weren’t many visitors she got in a day.

“Why don’t you come in? Have some more tea like last time?”

“No, I should really be going. Tippy will be home soon and I want to great her at the door.”

“Oh, that reminds me. I found a black case on my morning walk. Could this by

any chance be yours?" she asked.

Orlando paused. He took the case from her and looked it over, his mind wondering how she came across it.

"Just saw it this morning tangled up in one of the bushes," she said.

"Belongs to the wife," Orlando said, "She really loves your house. She was taking a picture of it and - well, never mind, glad you found it," he said, nodding his head and smiling and getting into his car as fast as he could.

Tippy was at work. It was the quickest way she felt she would be able to make friends in the new town. She worked on Tuesdays and Thursdays (barely). She was tucked away in her cubicle filing her nails and looking over her cuticles. She had her own routine: facial checks every other hour and constant revisions of check lists on her desk. She was a part-time customer service representative and a full time cosmetic consultant. She prided herself on selling cosmetics as her own business. She sold tons of it.

"I need some more of that facial mask crème," Francis said, tapping on her nails across the desk.

"I always have plenty."

Tippy unlocked her drawer and pulled out a pink bottle.

"You should have a party, Tippy. Get the girls together at your house. Bring in some good customers and make some good friends at the same time. This stuff uses good," Francis said.

"I was thinking about that. I'll get back to you," Tippy said.

That's how business ran at work. Orlando often teased her about using work as

her personal advertising, but it was true. Work worked more for her, than it did for her employer. Many of her clientele kept coming back for something or the other. Her work environment permitted the exchange and everyone dabbled in some form of selling. There were tupperware parties, cookie shows, jewelry gatherings, and figurine fiestas. It all kept them moving forward on minimal hours and more time for themselves.

Tippy didn't want more time. She wanted a convertible. She wanted the cosmetic convertible only given to top-selling cosmetic consultants. She didn't share this dream with her husband, because she knew he wasn't interested. Plus, it was her personal goal. It was her entire purpose of investing into her own business in the first place. As top, cosmetic sales woman for several years in her region, she felt she deserved it. Somehow it seemed to escape her each and every fiscal year. And now that she moved to a new region, where there were hardly any salespersons such as herself, she felt she had more of a running chance.

"What you need is some good luck," the other women often told her.

Tippy felt that she seemed to always come up short on something, short on not finishing beauty school, short on not being able to have a baby, and definitely short on marrying the right man. For years she cut out her objectives and placed them on construction paper she made into collages. It was her fun way of keeping focus on her goals. But life always had a habit of happening and compromising her aspirations. It was inevitable, she told herself. Each time she started over, she bought something new and stacked up in the house. Orlando didn't understand her need to constantly buy new things, but at the beginning, she could keep it under control. She promised she wouldn't pile it much in the new house, but things were already stacking up high.

Every other night they were fighting about stuff. Too much of it was everywhere, Orlando said. But it was hard for her to get rid of any one thing at a time. Which she thought would make things impossible to have a party at her house with all the things tipping over on everyone.

Tippy made sure to cut out a picture of the convertible and kept it planted deep within her purse. As a habit she always made sure to check for it. Her hand shifted around in her purse mixed about with stacks of business cards from her clients. Her continued customers always gave them to her. She thought for a moment the picture was gone and inadvertently knocked her purse over. The cards all fell out and onto the floor. A tacky pink business card with nothing but the name, 'Miss Middle', sat on the top of the pile. Ms. Middle was her best customer. She preferred the hand crème. Older women always did.

Thursday again. Orlando parked his car boldly in front of Ms. Middle's house. He didn't show Tippy the camera case yet. He was still suspicious about the entire thing. Tippy was buying more things than usual and hoarding them away into their home. Every now and then she asked him about the camera case and encouraged to go back to the spot and look for it, each time Ms. Middle's car was out on the road, sliding all over the place.

Today there was not car in the middle of the road. It was parked in the driveway. He sat in his car for a moment longer and then marched right up to her door.

"Finally, you got up enough never," she said when she answered.

She disappeared into the house. Orlando stood there for a moment with his hands in his pocket. He called out to her, but she didn't answer. There was a clinking and

clanking of glasses coming from below. He called out to her again and that's when the door to the basement opened up wide. The light was bright.

"Down here," she called.

He followed her voice.

"Ms. Middle?"

"I want you to have this," she said, she was waiting for him at the bottom of the basement stairs.

He couldn't help but to look confused. His hand braced the railing.

"A jar?"

"Yes, a jar," she said.

She sat the jar down on top of the long worker's table she had in the basement and wrote "Mrs. Willamena Wooten" on the face of the jar with a black sharpie. It was an empty jar.

"What's so special about a jar?" he asked.

"Nothing at all," she said, "Only what goes inside the jar, that might be special or not."

"You have to speak plain English with me, Ms. Middle. I'm afraid I'm not too quick on the puzzles as you are."

"This was fixing to be your jar, Mr. Wooten. But I've taken a liking to you. You're nothing at all that your wife made you out to be."

"That's what I came over today to talk to you about. I wasn't coming to bother you none. I wanted to ask you about this," he said, pulling out her business card from his pocket, "I found this in my wife's purse. Not that I snoop or anything like that. I mean, I

trust my wife and everything. But I'm mighty curious as to how this ended up with her.

Has she been over here?"

"She has," she said.

He looked around the basement, there were shelves and shelves of glass jars. They were all the same size, rattling next to each other. Some filled with red clay and others filled with nothing but air.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"Shhh!" she said, "You'll make them jump even more, "Your wife came to me to put a fix on you. But you're in luck, Mr. Wooten, you don't need any fixing."

"Fixing?"

"Catch a clue Mr. Orlando Wooten. Take this jar home, and tuck it away underneath all that mess piling up in your house. All the things you don't want will slowly start to disappear."

He started laughing. She didn't laugh. She looked him dead in the eyes and shook her head.

"You know, it gets hard sometimes, keeping things locked up. Feelings mostly. I'd be lying to say your wife's feelings and desires weren't on the loose. You can stand there and laugh all you want to Mr. Wooten, but laugh while taking this jar and doing exactly as I said."

He placed his hands in his pockets and jingled the changed in his pocket back and forth with his fingers.

"A house warming gift from the one and only Ms. Middle," she smiled.

"What happens if I open it?"

“The same thing that always happens when you open anything, you let whatever is trapped inside out.”