

Strongarm

Whole body hooped with fat, Alene shuffles through the screen door and around the tabby cat with an armload of videos and dumps them on the table before her new boyfriend.

There's a haze of smoke from the breakfast bacon, wafted with sun, but no sign of a dirty pot or pan or even a plate in the scoured kitchen to tell that breakfast has been begrudgingly served. Except for the boyfriend's coffee cup.

The shish-shish of Miss Adith's broom comes constant from the front of the roomy old house with the purl of crickets through open windows tall as doors.

"All they had," Alene says, scattering the confusion of video cases on the table. "A bunch of 'em you done seen."

"I ain't picky," says Randy and yawns with his brawny arms overhead. He has a reddish beard, polished-apple cheeks and dark scraggly brows. Black lashes, like sutures, corner the insides of his slit green eyes, lending a hard look. His hair is a weave of his beard and brow colors. When he stands, his stomach is almost flat, but sitting his girth masses into a tick-tight pooch.

Miss Adith's broom swishes nearer the kitchen.

Alene hefts two of the tapes from the white tablecloth. "What you want Kujo or The Babysitter?"

Randy scuffs his feet and lifts from his chair so that the legs clank on the floor and checks the pictures on the cases. "They didn't have no westerns over there?"

"Nothing you ain't seen a dozen times."

"Kujo then, Kujo's awright."

The crickety shish-shish now works its spell from the room off the kitchen.

Alene takes the Kujo tape to the tv on top of the squat refrigerator, shoves it into the mouth of the rented VCR, decked on the tv, and starts toggling the rig of buttons: a babble of talk-show voices, then a slice of silence that shims between the shishing of the broom, and draggy music that bolts with flashes of an oriental man--dark as a Negro on the bad tape--chopping toward the front of the poky screen.

"Mean, ain't he?" Alene says and laughs, sidling toward the screen door in the smoke-streaked sunshine. Now that she has a boyfriend, and doesn't have to worry about people thinking maybe she's butch, she has whacked her lank sandy hair about two inches long all over. Problem is, she ended up with a spiny effect, funny instead of smart.

Miss Adith has swept an invisible pile of dirt to the doorway between the kitchen and bathroom. With a mighty swing of her corn-straw broom, she whisks over the raised board threshold and stops to gouge out the cracks.

"Gotta go to work." Alene, at the door, checks her watch with the brown band bogged on her sausage wrist. "Randy, pick up your feet for Mama to sweep," she says, "you hear?"

He picks up his white crazed mug and swigs, watching tv and smoking, while Miss Adith sweeps around the rust-studded white refrigerator. Her sage hair bun capers across the screen with the swift bare soles of Kujo, who had just laid out six good men by himself.

Miss Adith in a white apron sweeps to the table and peeps under in her search for suspicious tracks. Shapeless gray skirt dipping in an arthritic curtsy. She frowns at the handsome tabby, set upright on a base of its curled tail, and her ears redden at the sight of Randy's number twelves, planted flat on the patch of boot-sanded mahogany. Whisking round his tooled-leather boots, she pokes at the insteps, then gathers her imaginary dirt behind the scurrying cat to the screen door.

"I'll be back for dinner," Alene says and shuffles down the green moldy steps ahead of the imaginary pile pushed by the very real broom.

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At the school where Alene works, she parks her blue crew-cab pickup in front of the office wing under a sheltering live oak, left front tire wallowing precisely into a pit in the dirt. The truck rocks to a halt. Cradling the school mail in her short fat arms, she slides out of the pickup, a short drop to the ground. Nothing compared to the drop before Tink Adams, the principal, ordered the shop boys to dig the hole, expressly for Alene.

Ambling along the chainlink fence and around the opening--no gate, which to Alene makes the fence about as necessary as a bird cage without a door--more State waste--Alene spies Tink's peaked bland face through the span of jalousies set in the orangy brick of the new office wing.

The new flat-top wing sits to the right of the check-mark breezeway, a curiosity against the old wing with portwine bricks and a steep hip roof. Grades K-12, all adequately schooled in the same building, though the State has just committed to a tacked-on row of rooms for the lower grades on the east playground. Whatever suits 'em.

A small boy with crewed fair hair and freckles jogs through the breezeway, giving off whiffs of pencil-lead, like thyme. Cracked-marble eyes glancing back, he tugs open one of the double doors for Alene to sidle through.

"You behaving yourself, boy?" she says and notes that a cloud of fear passes over his face.

He lets the door go as she clears the threshold and skids off in white tennis shoes toward the office on the right.

Tink, slumping out, nabs him by the collar of his striped knit shirt. "Go on in there and wait; I gotta talk to Miss Alene a sec."

Tink walls his coffee-stain eyes and pockets his hands in his gray gabardines. His chest caves from the pitch of his hunched shoulders. "Been waiting on you," he says, backing her to the other side of the hall.

"Ain't late, am I?"

"No, no, nothing like that." Hissing, his rubbery top lip tips to his nose. "Just need to talk to you."

"Yeah," Alene says, shifting on burdened feet, "what's up?"

Tink props one hand on the sulfur-yellow wall and the color transfers to his tawny skin. "Well, I got this problem."

She waits while he blows, ssh, ssh, ssh.

"Yeah?" she says.

"See, it's like this," he says, tan hair splaying on his scrunched neck. "State board's onto us. After me to put somebody else on to keep up reports, that crap. Says you ain't got the get up and go to see to whatall they want."

"So you give this somebody my job, huh?"

Behind Tink, the motor of a water fountain kicks on, a sleepy strum on the brief cool hall.

He snorts, comes off the wall and places one tawny-stained hand on her shoulder. "You know I couldn't run this school without you, you know that. Why, it'd be like ever other school in Georgia--the whole US of A for that matter--fighting and all. Drugs. You know what I mean. Teachers running all over the principal. Huh!"

"Uh huh." She waits.

"It's up to me and you to keep this school clean and smooth-running."

"So, what?"

"What I done was..." He wipes his face as if trouble is dirt. "I put this lil ole shirt-tail gal on part-time. Kind of a half-secretary, you know?"

"Which makes me the other half-secretary."

"Yeah, I reckon you could put it like that."

"With half pay, right?"

"Sort of." He pockets his stained hands again. "Course, you know right along I been robbing Peter to pay Paul, so to speak, for so-called extra duties."

"God!" she says loud, overshouting the buzzy clang of bells along the hall to signal change of classes. "I ain't making \$400 a month as it is."

"Don't get all worked up now. Don't! You know I ain't gone short-change nobody. Least of all you. Can't do without my buddy Alene, now can I?"

"Can you?"

"It's a known fact I can't and I ain't." He's in her face, hissing, his hard top lip baring gray sawed teeth. "Why, no longer'n school took in this morning, had a teacher calling for Alene to help her out of a jam."

"Let's get back to this new decoration for the office," Alene says, shifting her armload of magazines and mail.

"Well, I wouldn't exactly call her no decoration," he says, "but she's got a lot of pizazz, I reckon you'd call it. Been to college. Ain't a bit above reports--statistics, that's what they want."

"I ain't had time to mess with no statistics."

"I know, I know. What you do's a sight more important than any old statistics."

"About this gal..."

"Yeah?"

"She's pretty, huh?"

"Fair to middling."

"Young, right?"

He rocks his outstretched hand on the side. "So-so."

"I get it." Alene starts off toward the office.

"One more thing you oughta know." He bumps the wall with his stooped body.

"Yeah?" She stops.

"Had to move your desk to the cloak room."

"Cloak room?" She waits for two of the lunchroom ladies in white to pass between them and go into the office.

"Part-time janitor for the record." Tink palms the air as if to bounce back any protests. "Best me and the county board and super could come up with, so State won't get wind of you still on as secretary."

"I gotta hide out? make like I'm a janitor?"

"Sort of." He crosses his arms and spews air. "Course, you'll go on doing what you been doing."

"Cloak room. What about when the school nurse comes on Wednesdays?"

"I know you two'll hit it off fine. Like I told the wife, 'Alene can get along with most anybody, long as they behave.'"

Alene stalks off toward the second door on the right, a brown cut in the sulfur yellow wall. And as she passes the principal's office, she spies a toothy girl with a brown ponytail at her old spot by the copier.

"One of these days, Tink Adams"--Alene turns back--"you bunch of cowards is gone get your tail in a crack, trying to play it both ways."

###

She opens the door of the dark cloak room and a spirit of dank air furls over her.

"New office!" she says and blows and flips the light switch by the door. The powerful sulfur yellow blows back at her.

In the middle of the narrow windowless room stands an old floor fan. She plugs it in and steps in front of the hot draft and rattle, watching papers flip at the edges from stacks on the floor before her tank-green desk. Cardboard boxes of student and teacher records, which she hasn't got around to filing, have been placed about; and in the seat of her reinforced swivel chair, a couple of books donated to the school library, which she hasn't got around to reading yet. One more favor for Tink, who can't abide smut--even the word "cult" is a no-no--in his school library. Nothing but skid marks in the dust on the desk top where her junk has been slid into boxes.

A staticky crackle comes from one of the shimmed boxes and then a woman speaking in a precious lilt: "Alene, Alene?" Pause. "Alene, how about coming to room 6A for a minute?"

More staticky crackle as Alene grabbles among the boxes for the intercom, gives it up and follows the black cord feeding from the wall to a nest of papers under the desk. "Alene, Alene?"

She presses the return button on the black plastic box. "What you want?" she says.



Staticky crackle, then, "I have a boy here who can't seem to keep his hands to himself. Want to step over to room 6A and have a little talk with him?"

"Be right there." Alene puts the intercom on the desk and passes back through the hot draft. She starts to turn off the light but leaves it on--let the State start picking up the tab for her sorriness, same as they do for everybody else's.

At room 6A Alene opens the door off the musty brown hall, facing all forty-or-so wide eyes of the sixth graders and the young blonde teacher, who was hired because she was home-grown. One boy in the center row of desks sits head-high above the rest: black oily hair and pimples that fill in his fine scattered beard. He has that soft-muscled look that comes just before nature decides where to overlay squares on slopes. He's the only one in the class who doesn't look up.

The teacher at the front of the lofty room sits perched on her desk with slim legs tapering to the floor. She nods toward the boy.

"Blane Ford," Alene says in her sweetened tough voice, "you wanta step out here in the hall with me?"

He sits for a minute, smirking, then stands, snorts and kicks one stringy leg across the desk and struts with his arms crossed toward Alene. She waits for him to pass to the dim hall, then follows him out, closing the door behind her. Still holding to the knob, she again waits as he backs into the wall by the jamb and slides down, both clunky white sports shoes charged with supporting his weight, made up for the most part of height.

"What you wanta go messing with them girls for?" she says in a doubtful teasing tone.

He mumbles, looking down at the toe-punched leather of his shoes. "I ain't done it."

"Yeah, you did," she says, coming around to face him square. "Been at it ever since school started week before last; like to raped a little gal first day."

"Teacher's just picking on me."

"No, she ain't." Alene edges to his other side, feeling the tension hum in his stringy body like an electric wire. "Ain't no picking to it," she says, still in her old-aunt mode, toying before taking hold.

He grunts. Buckles his knees, then stiffens them.

Done with the sweet stuff, she grabs his left elbow and yanks him off the wall and his head flies up as he wheels, facing her. He grits his teeth and clinches his corded fists. She steps so close that her body touches his as he backs across the hall to the door of 6B.

"Me," she hisses, "I ain't picking on you, I'll just pinch your head off and send it home to Mama on the schoolbus."

He puffs through his little boy nose--an undecided snub.

"You hear?" she says.

He stretches, puffing, a good foot taller than Alene.

"You hear?"

"Yessum."

"Now see if you can't go on back in there and behave yourself, and don't listen or do your lessons if you don't want to. But see you set there and let everybody else do theirs. Learning ain't gone do you much good now nohow; you bout to turn sixteen and then you can quit. I ain't innerstid in no report on your learning, but when the report on your behaving passes through my office, I want a A on it."

Reaching up and seizing him by the scruff of the neck, she steers him toward the door of 6A. As she swings the door wide, locking eyes with the open-faced sixth graders, she smiles and lets go of Blane Ford.

He stumbles inside and she closes the door softly.

###

Stepping from the swelter of the breezeway into the cold-storage of the sulfur-yellow hall, she again faces Tink.

"Gotcha some chocolate cake," he says and hands her a wrapped wedge of cake with runny chocolate icing stuck to waxed paper.

"Your new secretary make it?" Alene takes it and stalks off toward the lit cloak room.

"Don't do like that now," he says and goes on into his office.

Alene stops in the cloak room doorway, facing blowing papers at the rear and a table set up for the county nurse in the middle. "How you, Alene?" says Gladys the nurse, peeping from a squat behind the table with stoppered bottles and celophane packets on top.

"Was doing fine till this morning," Alene says and turns around, heading for Tink's office.

On her way in, she hears the phone ring and Tink answer, no trace of the other half-secretary.

"Hello?" he says and waits. "Yeah, sug, what you want?" He listens with his top lip flipped on gray teeth. "A new one? Any new one, right? Yeah, sug, yeah, yeah, ain't no trouble." He slams the phone. "Janie. Wanting another old romance to set and read. I swannee! I done picked over everthing in that blasted library."

"Hey, Tink," Alene says, "me and you gotta talk."

He slumps around his desk and sits in his chair with fingers steepled under his knob chin. "Listen, talking about libraries, we gone have to go on and do something with that damned Ann Lewis. NAACP or not. Gone have to scare her up so good she'll be begging us to let her go. Or start working one. Scared to death if she files a complaint with State, you'll come after her."

"Tink, I ain't...." Alene starts.

"Course she's gone holler and take on about you running over her cause she's black, everlast one of us knowing she ain't worth a flip in that library. Been laying up on the couch evertime I go by. And me warning her. And the other teachers is all complaining cause she won't let their classes come in groups to check out books."

"Tink." Alene waves a hand before his bland face, an old habit that she knows feeds his ego--principal doggedly driven to put his school on top. "Tink, I ain't staying under no such conditions, understand?"

"Huh?" he watches her with his mouth gaped.

"Run off Ann Lewis yourself; I ain't working for you no more."

"Where you reckon you'll get another job then?"

"I don't know, in Valdosta maybe."

"You can't drive all the way up there, morning and night. Sides, look at the cost of gas and all. Here, you finally got you a boyfriend, got a truck payment ever month."

"I'll get by." She hikes herself up by pressing on the chair arms and walks off.

"I hate to mention this, but ain't everybody's gone hire a woman in your shape," he says. "Know what I mean?"

She keeps walking toward the door, throwing her voice back. "Let me eat my dinner while I study on it."

###

Miss Adith has slid the videos down the table in front of Randy, still sitting with his boots crossed in the same chair, now watching The Babysitter.

As if he isn't even there, Miss Adith fills up the rest of the oval oak table with bowls of creamed corn and butterbeans and steamed okra and squash, a fluted platter with a painted turkey full of fried chicken thighs and wings. And a black iron skillet of faintly charred cornbread.

Alene waddles through the screen door again, letting in the tabby cat. Her face is red from the noon heat and deepening to a purplish rose from the added heat of the oven. Of course, her blood pressure is up.

But if Miss Adith, trailing from the stove under the long window to the table in the middle of the room, notices Alene's fired face, she doesn't say anything. Hasn't spoken except when absolutely necessary since Alene picked Randy up on the road, hitch-hiking 94.

Alene has always been bad to pick up hitchhikers because she knows what it's like to be on foot and begging rides. Before she got her truck. Unlike most people who are afraid to give strangers a lift, she's never worried about somebody overpowering her. Odd how fat and can be mistaken for muscle and big talk for power. Even she has begun to believe it.

"Looks like I might be out of a job," she says, washing her stubby soft hands in the kitchen sink with her mama walking around her to get plates dishes from the curtained cupboards. Coarse white homespun carries from half-curtains parted on the mullioned windows, to shirred skirts on the wall of cupboards, to the old lady's apron-- quick with no-frills and cut from the same bolt.

Miss Adith stops for a second and glares at Alene with her pea eyes, then gathers a fistful of spoons and forks from a drawer and hobbles off to the table.

Alene dries her hands on the white terry dishtowel and goes over to sit next to Randy, sliding the plate set on the end near Miss Adith to her new place. "Tink's got hisself a new secretary."

Miss Adith seats herself stubbornly across from Alene, a chair between her and Randy--on the end where Alene's daddy sat before he died. Miss Adith bows her head, mumbling a blessing on her share of the food only. When she finishes praying, she begins passing bowls to Alene, who dips double-helpings to Randy's plate, then her own.

He chuckles from his muscle-strutted chest, watching the babysitter with a ponytail who has just killed the family cat on the set above the refrigerator.

"She shore got rid of that varmint," says Alene and laughs.

Lacquered with sweat, Randy's face looks like the painted face of a ventriloquist's dummy. "You got any ketchup?" he says to the tv and waves a drumstick from his braced elbow.

Alene, poised for a first bite of creamed corn, gets up and goes to the refrigerator and brings back the ketchup and sets it before his plate, piled high with food: two wings on top of two wedges of cornbread and a gumbo of vegetables.

Miss Adith's eyes bob from Randy to Alene, both watching the babysitter cut up the cat over a steaming stewpot. The old lady has neatly parted dabs of vegetables on her plain white plate.

Alene knows her mama's dying to talk about the job-issue, that she's worried sick, and decides not saying anything more is good punishment for the old lady's stubbornness over the Randy-issue. The way she's treated them both.

When Alene had brought him home and deposited his split gray duffel in her bedroom, Miss Adith with her stern lips set had stood off in the dim high hall with her broom poised. Not a word.

Alene had made up her mind to offer no explanations--after all, she's thirty-seven now--and to let it be known that she's done with sitting night after night following supper on the front porch with Mama, done with walking over Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings (and nights) to the Methodist Church next door with Mama for another dull sermon on fornication, which Alene has never partaken of, and sin in general, which she has. Alene would no longer substitute as man-of-the-house. She would no longer be pitied for being fat or taken for granted. Or used as a bully. But what about her job? What about Tink, who still has that power?

On her second round of corn and chicken and butterbeans and cornbread, she knows she'll have to go back to school or give up her truck: a two-hundred dollar payment the first of each month that she usually tries to pay by the 30th of the last month to insure her good credit and just prays that the finance company doesn't miscalculate and discredit her, thinking she's late because she's paid on the last of the month instead of the first. She should start paying right on time, but routine is hard to break and she's broken with enough routine for now.

Her mama is eyeing her across the table, as if reading her red face, and Alene starts to set the old lady's mind at ease by admitting that she can stay on as janitor at the school, that she does have options, but changes her mind when Miss Adith refuses to pass Randy another piece of cornbread.

"Gotta go," Alene says and pushes back from the table, leaving her plate for Miss Adith to rake out to the cat and wash. "Randy, help Mama with the dishes." Having added that, she feels she's given up on the point she's trying to make--no more sweet-Alene, Mama.

###

In her new office she sets up an imaginary wall between her space at the rear and the county nurse's at the front. And the roving line of fourth graders coming in for TB skin tests.

But while she sorts through boxes of papers and folders, setting bounds around her desk, the children gaze and circle past the rattly floor fan. Now and then one bends behind the turning blades and in a spattered trill says "Hey, Alene" and she says hey back and "You behaving yourself?"



After twenty years working at the school--starting with high school, a bonafide secretary--she knows all these children and the children before and before them and most of their parents, many who went to school with her. Same old school here in Cornerville. And it seems that she's never broken with being a student and doesn't want to. Despite all her blustering self-confidence--how everybody thinks of her--she wouldn't know how to manage away from the school and feels the urge to gnaw her nails just thinking about it.

What she'd really like right now is to sit and type, to lose herself in the pecking rhythm, to sink her eyes in the print scrolling up from the body of the big blocky Remington, but no letters or reports have been called for from Tink's office. Maybe he took her at her word about quitting. Or is the new toothy gal handling all the typing too?

Alene strains to hear beyond the babble and rattle and imagines next door the cranking of a new typewriter roller, a sleek oiled sound, and the soft faf-faf of keys, and she knows that her only job now is to keep order around the school. Kind of like Kujo.

Settling in at her desk with its wire bins of reports and gifts from students and teachers--mostly heftless candy boxes and cookie tins with fluted paper shells--she starts to eat the chocolate cake with its melty cooked-icing coat on waxed paper. But she doesn't. She leaves it on top of her desk to show Tink that she can't be bought. That she's staying because she has to, that his peace offering is going untouched. Her one willful act. And the cake haunts her. She can smell the warm wax and chocolate mingled with the nurse's alcohol.

She has to have something sweet to follow up something salty and she wishes she'd waited for dessert at home. What dessert? Mama, what ails you!

She should go on over to the school library and strong-arm Ann Lewis as Tink ordered. (He always starts out with a friendly assay of the situation at hand, as if he's giving her alternatives or asking advice, and leaves it up to her to follow through.) What will happen if she doesn't do it? She doesn't want to think. Because in spite of his seeming buddiness, he just might fire her.

The fifth graders, passing through from a line formed in the hall, stare at Alene with alarmed eyes, dreading either her finding out about some mischief or their turns at the card table with its alcohol swabs and syringes. Tetanus boosters.

###

For supper Miss Adith feeds Alene and Randy leftover chicken, corn and butterbeans, what's left of the smothered okra, all tepid from sitting on the stove since dinner. Then Alene and Randy go out to sit on the front porch and watch the sun set behind the blinking red light at the crossing uptown. And slap at mosquitoes hatched at Troublesome Creek.

Most evenings they go out in the backyard for Randy to practice calling up owls from the creek. The first time he'd hooded the great birds with mop heads to the yard--two screech owls swooping from the viny gumwoods to the pecan trees above the house--Alene had believed that he might stay forever, that her mama might witness that something inside him, that something Alene can't quite figure but can feel--not love, nothing like that--but it hadn't happened. And in the light of day, she knows he'll go, she just doesn't know when. He

does different kinds of calls, even mating calls for various kinds of owls, magic in the strange hoos from his cupped mouth that boomerang back with the owls from Troublesome Creek.

But on Wednesday nights, prayer-meeting at the church next door, out of respect for Miss Adith, Alene and Randy sit quietly on the front porch, overlooking the courthouse and the post office, the white of the Alapaha River bridge welling through the gap of smoky-gray gravel that leads west out of Cornerville.

Randy sits on the doorsteps and Alene sits centered in the glider with rolled metal slats.

They hear Miss Adith slam the kitchen door, hear her feet scratch across the sideyard grass, to the stitched grass of the church yard. A few cars and trucks idle along the highway that fronts the house, everybody waving and Alene waving back, each time telling Randy who has passed as if to acquaint him with his new neighbors.

Technically, Cornerville, the seat of Swanooshee County, is the smallest incorporated town in Georgia because the courthouse square has been designated city to save everybody the pain of paying extra taxes. But even if you counted the entire population of the surrounding flatwoods--east to the Okefenokee spillover, and west to Valdosta, and south to the Florida line, and north across Troublesome Creek, beyond the old Samson Powder Camp (the last industry in Cornerville, shut down some thirty years ago)--all of Swanooshee County would still amount to the scantiest population in Georgia, though pinewoods cover better than 250,000 acres.

Alene has never before considered leaving Swanoochee County, but as she watches Randy smoking on the doorsteps with his knees cocked and his bare white toes cooped over the third step and the few cars motoring up on the slanted thready lawn of the church, she thinks about it. She figures Randy will soon go--she's been thinking that off and on for two months--and she might leave with him. But she can't imagine what life on the road would be like, and knows deep down that her nerves couldn't take the lack of routine, that routine is as surely in her own blood as it is in her mama's. But considering going makes her heart pitter quicker, and not just to show anybody--Tink or Miss Adith--but for the unknownness and adventure of hitting the open road and finding what's beyond the beyond: Valdosta, Georgia, and Jasper, Florida, and the Okefenokee, about as far as she's ever been from home.

If she were young and slim, maybe. Her body requires so much food and constant adjusting for comfort--a simple though complicated matter of getting in just the right sitting or sleeping position. And suddenly her head warms, thinking how absolutely ridiculous it is to be a prisoner to her own needs, how she spends every waking moment trying to keep comfortable. Not only get comfortable, but keep comfortable. Why she's been putting up with Tink and maybe even her mama for so long.

Randy, smoking satisfied on the steps, is her only break with keeping comfortable. He's a jot on a note to Mama of what Alene might do; she's using him as surely as he's using her for food in his mouth and a roof over his head. They've never even had sex--she never has with anyone--yet they sleep in the same bed. Him on one side and her on the other, though her wallowed-out spot from years of

impact in the center of the packed cotton mattress keeps rolling him to her. Sometimes during the night, when he banks against her, she lies there wide awake feeling his hard hot body and listening to him snore. Before he can wake and realize he's close, she eases up to keep from feeling him cringe. But like now, with the sun weakening and dusk coming strong around the suppering noise of the town, she can't wait to go to bed. Her going first, while he watches tv till twelve or so, and then him edging in on the other side, falling asleep and meeting her in the middle.

And if Miss Adith thinks the worst, let her. Beats all of them thinking the best of poor Alene.

"When you leaving?" she asks Randy.

He cuts his squeezed eyes to the side so that the irises look like Coca-cola glass. "I ain't got no set time." He sucks on a cigarette and thumps the butt to the black dirt patch next to the spalled concrete walk. "How come you to ask?"

"Figgered you was getting antsy," she says, gliding with her arms over the curled back of the slats, underarm flesh like wings.

He slaps a mosquito on his arm, raking down, then lights another cigarette, staring out at the churchyard where a song of Jesus filters through the puckered yellow glass of stained windows. Louvered-in steeple pending white against the hoop of violet trimmed sky. "You asking me to go?"

"Nope, not till you good and ready," she says, adding, "not till you get some place to go." Adding to be sure he knows that she's doing him a favor and not the other way around.

They wait in the stillness spawned by dark and the tiring-down thrum of locusts, wait till the double doors of the church scrape back and shed light on the sham of their togetherness. Then they go inside, Alene to her bedroom and Randy to the kitchen to watch tv.

She lies in the grainy dark of her tall room, the iron foot of her bed bermed by cardboard boxes of old books and clothes, and listens to the drone of tv voices and music and Miss Adith in the bathroom, straightening up and getting ready for bed. She'll make one more scouring round in the kitchen before she gives up her watch over the orderly house for the night: set out the grits pot, up-side down on top of the eye; the black iron pan beside it; and even measure the coffee and water into the percolator. Tomorrow's routine set to start at six on the dot.

Shortly after Alene hears Miss Adith's door click-to, she hears the tv racket cut and Randy step lightly along the hall. He stops before Alene's door and then opens it to a faint drift of cigarette smoke.

Alene closes her eyes, breathing even as if asleep--how she hopes she sleeps, without snoring, though she doubts it.

He walks around to the other side of the bed and sits on the edge, forcing off his boots and setting them on the floor. Then he takes off his pants, a whisper of zipper, and yanks the snaps of his western shirt with one downward snatch.

A mosquito buzzes about Alene's face and she puffs lightly, still practicing her sleep breathing.

He crawls between the sheets and for a few minutes lies with his arms folded under his head, then scoots to her. Not feigning sleep or cringing, though she can tell by his breathless stillness that he's rethinking his last move, that maybe all along he's known that he has slept sweat-stuck to her side.

"You ain't got to lay here," she says, "you ain't got to do nothing."

"I know it," he says, mouth to her ear.

They lie there sweating and still while a mosquito spins a web of whining around their heads. Then stops. And when it doesn't bite Alene, she knows it is biting Randy. His arms stay by his side.

"I oughta do something for you," he whispers.

"Like what?" She feels mad suddenly, him saying that.

"You know," he says, wriggling his arms. "Us here in the same bed and...."

"Well, you can start doing something for me by getting back on your side."

He scoots over and tucks his hands beneath his head, elbow in her temple. "I just thought..."

"Don't think, not about me."

"I mean, being as how I been letting you feed me all this time, the least I could do..." He stops, reaches down to his shirt on the floor and rattles a pack of cigarettes, and in a second flicks the striker on his lighter.

She watches the red glow of the cigarette in the dark, its reflection in the tall mullioned window next to the bed.

Maybe she should go ahead and let him do whatever he has in mind, and hang humiliation. Hang Mama. He'll be gone soon and at least she'll know what the fuss is about. What all the soaps and romance novels find worthy of centering whole episodes and chapters around.

So, when she doesn't say anything for awhile, he stubs out the cigarette in his ashtray on the floor and inches back.

She waits, feeling a slow heat gather in her loins, a metallic mist on her tongue. She closes her eyes and the dark behind her lids is no darker than the room. The same.

The next morning, she gets up as usual and goes to the Delta to take back and rent more and the same videos, and brings them home, the shish-shish of the broom along the hall, in the bathroom, and Randy at the table, smoking and drinking coffee. Waiting.

Alene is glad that he never looks directly into anybody's eyes, so she won't have to see and wonder if what she reads there is pity or mockery. Though last night in bed had gone ok, as far as she knows with nothing to gauge ok by. And she is, in spite of herself, a little pleased--not by how it felt, which had actually made her poor used-to-being-pleased body uncomfortable. Sweaty and invaded. But he'd shuddered and closed over her at the end, unmistakable pleasure, and pleasure for her in his powerlessness, her power over him. The true miracle and mystique of sex.

But she fully expects him to go before she gets back from work.



"Pick up your feet for Mama to sweep," she says, going out to the cool morning. Witness to the first hints of fall, the bluish light rendered by the sun's southward arc and the keening-down of clustering locusts. And of course the shish of the broom.

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All morning, she manages to miss Tink and even to keep from eating the cake, whose icing has now congealed again to the egg-yellow stacked wedges. She doesn't even want it really, but she leaves it there between wire bins on her desk. Just in case.

She doesn't go to the library to spook Ann Lewis either, though she knows she will, that her job is forcing order and not typing or decorating some office. And it's ok to do it: in truth people like Ann, black or white, have to be taught that they do their jobs or lose them, regardless of who or what color. Which college degree. That this is one school that won't be strong-armed by the State. By a bunch of silly laws set down by lawmakers who side with minorities to keep their seats in Atlanta. And Alene feels almost proud of her job. A job that not everybody can do--typing and answering the phone seem common. Even Tink-the-coward's job seems common. Besides, her job is not all that different than, say, the county sheriff's.

After a few rounds of the old school wing, to stress that she's on patrol, Alene goes home for lunch.

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And though Miss Adith is as usual busy getting dinner on the table--barbecued spareribs on Thursdays--the tv is off and Randy is gone from his boot-sanded spot at the table end.

Alene keeps quiet until after she's washed her hands, then can't wait a second longer. "Where's Randy?" She can't cut the frantic tilt in her tone.

The old lady shrugs and pulls out a pan of charred ribs with tomatoes sauce from the spotless oven.

"He left, huh?" Alene says, because she might as well say as think it. And she knows why he's gone.

Then she hears the rebound of his hard boot heels from the front of the house and hopes, hating herself for hoping.

She follows the sound along the hall to her bedroom, opens the door and finds him standing over the bed with his split gray duffel.

He presses the bag with his knee and zips it.

She starts to go out and close the door and just let him leave. Then changes her mind. "You gone, huh?" she says.

He turns around and one side of his face is scratched and red welty.

"What happened to your head?"

"Old lady walloped me with her broom."

"Lord God amighty!" Alene says, then shouts, "Mama what ails you!" The old lady has never even spanked Alene, just fed her.

"Figgered I'd best get out of her kitchen," he says, hoisting the duffel to his shoulder and stumping toward Alene.

"Yeah, I reckon," she says. "You got any cash?"

"Don't need none." He stops before her. "But I thank you, and I thank you for all you done."

"Wadn't no more'n I'd do for nobody else."

"Well, I'm obliged anyhow."

She backs into the hall for him to pass. "If you ever around these parts, drop by, you hear?"

"I'll do it," he says, lifting his fawn felt cowboy hat from the nail on the unpainted wainscotting. Then he opens the screen door and steps to the porch.

She follows, holding the door wide and letting in the heat to the cool hall, thinking in amazement how little heat seeps through the screen.

As he gets to the doorsteps, she decides to go on and ask and it takes all her boxed-up nerve to do it. "Hey, Randy, you wadn't never scared of me, was you??

He stops, fitting his hat on his head. "Never crossed my mind," he says and sallies down the walk. At the end he turns back and grins. "What about you? Was you ever once scared of me?"

"Huh uh."

"Ain't neither one of us no boogerman."

She laughs, thinking that scaring people, for all its drawbacks, has its place.