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Wait

WAIT.

To tell you any of these stories, I have to tell you the first. The very first.

Somewhere in Mattawan, Michigan, there is an infant buried on top of a thirteen-year-old girl's grave. The infant, stillborn, was given a name anyway but the wind buried the syllables under its cool tongue. The child's sutured eyes and never-kissed lips greeted that 1950s winter sky, the color of heron wings, when her father—my grandfather—opened another hole in the mute earth and laid his second unforgiving child's body to rest in her sister's slender, waiting arms. Finally, someone to hold. Frieda shifted and yawned into the earth. Together there, my two aunts, the virgin and the infant, kept each other safe. They shared the secret of each other's bones.

And there were a lot of secrets.

Maybe I am the unborn child. Perhaps she returned in me to tell our story from my woman-child hands, Velma Jean's daughter's hands, fourth girl-child's hands, since we are, after all, the baby girls and at once the sixth seed. We both prefer the dent of rain in the earth to the din of voices, the fists, the liquor laugh-screams at family gatherings. Equally, we cherish our silence. And if I am her, what did I see hovering over the farm before the last mound of dirt covered me? What would I say first? Maybe something about the Potawatomi, Ottawa, and the Ojibwa building wigwams on riverbanks, before French trappers, missionaries, and settlers came. Something about Mama's sweet cornbread and Daddy's cold beer. The five little burnished-yellow Mattawan

fairies. Mulatto skin. Pocahontas eyes. I would take you to the fields, to Wolf Lake, to the bait house. Push you on the tire swing laced to the top branch of the weeping willow in the front yard; push you until you were dizzy, and then I would say it:

What I don't know I can't tell.

Mourning, 2000

“HEY MOMMY,” I say through the door crack. I cling to my nine-year-old daughter’s hand. It is hours past midnight.

“Hello.” Almost suspiciously, as if I bear more bad news under my blouse, in my airplane-tossed hair, my mother glares at me and cracks the front door one wedge further. I bite down on the useless *how are you?* when Death Happens, and there’s no point in asking.

“Come in,” she finally says and steps back. As we enter, the dank June humidity of the Midwest seeps in like a long-lost friend behind our bodies and luggage, palpable, leech-like. We pour in with it, the heat smoldering, the damp, hot darkness turning my daughter’s once straightened hair into a black puff pastry. She doesn’t know yet that pressing combs are useless trinkets in a Kalamazoo and Portage summer.

The city is a bowl-like valley “inherited” in bogus treaties from American Indians in the region, and all the moisture created by the sun pounding down on streams and lakes traps itself there until an autumn breeze out of Detroit by way of Canada wanders through, and suddenly it’s winter. Then the soft flakes and high winds can curl up a blizzard in two seconds flat—one that stays for weeks, closing schools, bingo halls, and roads, laying over the mitten state like a foamy white blanket.

“Hey Grandma,” Afiya says softly. Kind of ducking, my daughter almost tucks her neck into her shoulders like a turtle trying not to be seen; I recognize that tactic. I did it my entire childhood, but in my family, I could never hide.

I hug my daughter to me to assuage her nervousness. A warm bread scent exudes from the crown of her head. My mother mutters a faint greeting, eyes puffy but dry, then wordlessly ushers us through the dim living room. Her sheer, pale blue nightgown flares around thick thighs as she walks; curlers stick out around her head, making her look a little like a Martian. My mother's sallow face has sharpened with loss of her sister, my Aunt Phyllis, a middle daughter like me. But grief, for Velma Jean Stafford, turns into fury, into mirthless laughter: then a small storm.

Cautiously, I pad behind her: "Y'all staying in the star room."

Somehow my mother seems shorter in the four a.m. darkness, as if she is shrinking, disappearing before me. She is no longer the sparkling shooting star from my youth, no longer all legs, smooth banana candy skin and luminously long, black river hair. Somewhere between the raising of us hardheaded kids, taking care of other people's old folks at Matheson Nursing Home for the last twenty-five years, spinning Ray Charles forty-fives and making bologna sandwiches for us to choke down like wolverines, my mother has grown old.

Unfairly, I hold this mother up to the one who raised me—a young buttercup-complexioned hot mama from the seventies, who gleefully called to me to "shake that money maker" when I was a kid. In pictures, her silk go-go boots laced up her firm calves spoke of her go-go dancer days. The tight polyester pants or those seventies softball shorts flaunted her beauty, her defiance, her wide hips—and she had thighs for days, even as a child. Before she cut her tresses, her black hair staggered like a heavy blanket at the back of her neck—that "good Indian hair" that became a convenient synonym for "Mixed blood" and was followed by "What you mixed with?" and "What are you?" To which my mother replied, "Human."

"If y'all hungry," she says, in a tone that says, *I hope not.*

If my mother knew anything about being Indian, the culture and practices of any Indian tribe, she never told me. Our Indian heritage was oral history until I tracked it down to Sampson, Hertford, Halifax, and Greenville-Northampton Counties, all in North Carolina and on the cusp of Virginia. I had traced one ancestor, a Manuel, back to the Revolutionary War and thought about joining Daughters of the American Revolution just to shake things up. My great-great-grandfathers, George Thomas Manuel, Jeremiah Stafford, Sr., and Willis Roberts, Jr., were all Mixed bloods, Free People of Color, whose forebears had married full-blooded Indian women or who themselves were born into those tribes. While my mother always thought our Indian blood came from the local Kalamazoo tribes, instead we were migrants on the Appalachian Trail, of the Coharie/Neuse and Eastern Band and Delaware Cherokee tribes; on my dad's side I was Choctaw. But we didn't know any history: we didn't know our history. That was the Problem.

If my mother ever knew that Kikalamazoo was the original Indian name of Kalamazoo, meaning "mirage" or "reflection in the mirror or water," or any history of our family and the migration we'd taken from North Carolina, she never told a soul. But Mama kept all her secrets locked up tight anyway, her grin hard and bright as a swamp star in her face.

We shake our heads: "Just tired," I say. I wake with the rooster's crow no matter where I am in the world. Mama wakes between three a.m. and four a.m. regularly, as if she is still feeding hogs on her daddy's farm in Mattawan.

This big comfy house in Portage is the Waldorf compared to the houses we'd lived in, and most of all, to that farm where she grew up without running water, with a shanty-looking outhouse. With its modest backyard, close to the Kalamazoo county line, the Portage house hums with safety, unlike Southworth Terrace on the

Eastside where we grew up—we were card dealers, always trying to hustle her. Here, she is happy, but age and worry show.

Maybe it only shows when we kids come home.

I can see the outline of her squat body and imagine the patchwork quilt that we, the seven children born there, had made of her once slender body. All our lives, we were pretty damn sure our mother hated us a little for our constant hunger, our need to be held, and most assuredly, for each new stretch mark and each scar that ripped up her flat dancer's stomach. But maybe all mothers hated their children a little for this unintended slight; the first rupture started at sixteen and seemed never to stop. She almost died at forty, having the last boy. That was the year she cut off all her hair.

“Nite Mommy.”

“Good night.” My mother disappears down the dark hall, clicking her door shut.

Afiya immediately crumples into the soft bed, travel clothes and all, and is snoring in seconds. I change into my pajamas quickly and climb in beside her. In the dark, I look around the room my mother reserves for me in her new house when I come home. The star room, I call it, because the ceiling is lined with miniature luminescent crescent moons and stars that glow in the dark long after the light has gone out. It's an appropriate room for me, the baby girl, the dreamer.

“She so *special*,” my sisters whispered behind my back when I was ten years old as I devoured book after book, starting at nine with *Harriet the Spy*, *Ursula Le Guin*, and Phyllis A. Whitney mystery books, then *I Am the Darker Brother*, with Harlem Renaissance poems by Gwendolyn Brooks, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes.

“Um-hum.” Bobbie Ann, the eldest, would roll her eyes hard until you saw the whites when she heard I had taken to reading in the bathtub atop a pile of blankets and pillows. “Touched. So backwoods. Just like her Mama.”

The bathtub was the only place I could find peace when they played or fought and it often sounded the same. When they were playing, the house thundered with their pounding feet and laughter; when they were fighting, the house was a wolf den, and they, we, were a pack of wolves, fists and fangs forever bared. Reading was the only way I could drown out the constant backdrop of loud voices, or train whistles and steel wheels crunching rusty railroad tracks that crisscrossed Kalamazoo like a lattice.

To hear my family tell it, despite my two English degrees, I still had “not a lick of sense.” Yet more importantly, I lacked an understanding of myself in a family who would kick you just as soon as kiss you. Blacken your eye as soon as buy you a Twinkie. Growing up I never knew where the laughter, pinch, or jab was coming from. We reenacted that enslavement love. That Trail of Tears love.

Caught in a nightmare, my lanky daughter turns restlessly and unexpectedly, flings out her hand and smacks me in the face.

“Hey,” I hiss, blinking back stinging tears. “Move over.”

Afiya’s eyelids flutter. That over-hot bread scent oozes from her. In the soft dark, her oval face, more olive toned than brown, frowns up. In the half-awake, half-dream, she recognizes my voice, and the intention to push her off the bed if she hits me again, and she rolls back toward the wall. Her breathing evens and she lies still.

The house creaks and settles.