

excerpt from On the Blood

Say I wanted to know something about Lev—where he was at or what size his underwear was.

Then I was gon call Juanita and ask her.

“Fuck you, Sorren. I’m setting here waiting on your funeral. I’m rubbing my hands thinking how I’m a shoot up the hearse.”

We talked like that half a year, at least.

I’d say, “Come on now. Don’t be like that, Juanita girl. Tell me where our man at. I got something I need to tell him.”

She’d say, “Bitch, choke! Choke on a chicken bone—please!”

And we’d fuss and fuss til she got sick to her stomach of me and hung up.

She wouldn’t never mean to tell me where he was, but I’d upset her so much she’d break apart, trip up. She’d say, “Soon as that big belly nigger get back from the market I’m gon remind him how much of a whore you are Sorren,” or something like that. And I knew to head over to Tops on Genesee. That ain’t work once, but always. You could bet the house on Juanita.

That was 1984. Me and Lev Beginning met February 16, 1984 in Tree’s Bar, middle of a Buffalo winter.

He said, “What you take?”

I told him top shelf gin, no stutter.

A drink wasn’t shit to me. I’da snatched it quick, hopped down off that stool and run.

He gon say, “But should I tell Tree cut it some?”

I thought, now what a sugar sweet man doing in this hellhole here? With these bums? A nigga I ain’t gotta run from? I looked him over. He ain’t have but a drop of color. And too much stomach.

I told him, “No, no thank you. I’m grown.”

But he yelled up the bar anyway. “Add a cap a club soda to that, Tree.”

That’s a little stupid thing, but still.

He told me he was married right off, because he a wide-open liar—the sort that tell you everything but nothing at all. I said what you telling me for? He said that don’t bother you none? I said it don’t bother you? He said, now and again. Now and again it do.

Wasn’t nothing for him. He had everything against him. Old. Married. Stomach big. Not big, big, say, but it’d catch your eye. You might describe him by it. You might say, “Ole Lev live in the Fruit Belt with that getting there gut.” You might say he ain’t have not a stitch of hair til you was coming up on his ears, and what little there was was on the verge of gray. Knotty if he ain’t keep it cut low, which ain’t a thing, except if you bright, and he was. I can take knotty hair on a woman fine, but not no man, and especially, especially not if he light. No woman in the high-deep world want a high yellow man. He struggle making you think you safe. His mouth taste like Sweet’n Low. But here I said never mind to all of that and told him come on. He said, “My name Lev Beginning,” and the blood left my hands.

We went on back to my place and fucked that same night. Because I couldn’t help it. Something about a man got all the ingredients for ugly and wrong and he pull off smooth. Or something about him sliding them ribs back and forth through his mouth real quick, licking em free of everything, the meat and sauce, yes, but whatever was left too—vein, gristle. Something about leaving barbeque sauce hanging off his fingers. Then holding them up for me to lick clean. Making me lean in to do it. Expecting I would. And he ain’t even know me. Something about that and him drinking everything could be swallowed and not tipping left or right— holding the liquor—made me wanna split my legs for him. Then he kept quiet when every man in Tree’s was running his mouth, and I wanted to keep em split.

I told him pull the twin-size mattress out into the hall and leave the sheets.

That thing was thin as the breeze, a joke, but the hallway was the only space with a light above it, and I wanted to see everything on him. His fat stomach, everything. A lamp woulda meant shadows. And I couldn't be up under no cover neither, because I needed to watch every move he was gon make. Everything he was gon do with me. Was he gon eat my pussy like he did them ribs? Hold my wrists so tight I wanted up? How big was his dick gon be? Lord Jesus, let it bust me open. Be big as a nightmare. Make me limp til Thursday. All those things, I needed to know, so I had to see. And he ain't ask a single question. Not how come, not why not. He mighta said, "What we gotta fuck out here for when you got bedrooms all around?" I didn't have to say because I wanted us to have nowhere to go. Because a bigger bed and you could roll there or there, outta my reach. I didn't have to explain nothing to Lev.

He was a little rough, and a little not. I coulda stood a bit more mishandling, but I ain't know was he too old to hurt me. I told him so. He said he was only waiting on the word. So then we fucked and fucked and fucked. But wasn't morning before I thought maybe he was slipping.

It wasn't the feeling that was new. Men fuck and get slippery—they leave. What was new was I ain't want him gone. I ain't never, never met a man I ain't want gone the minute after. Never. They call that feeling there slut. I started to ask him, but where you headed? And here he was right there with me.

I gripped the fat on his sides. I tongue kissed him. I begged him in my head. And I thought he answered, but I couldn't all the way tell.

Only thing I could think was to ask him for his phone number. But he bit his mouth shut. We was smoking a reefer by then. I kept checking between myself to see was my pussy all right. It was throbbing to be sure. A beating heart, boy.

"You heard me?" I said. I couldn't say I loved him and I couldn't tell him I just wanted to know what a woman married to a man like him sounded like. I was just gon call, listen for Juanita

hello, and then hang up. But I couldn't tell him. I couldn't tell him, "Don't go," neither. So I said, "You heard me?"

"I won't call it when she there."

He pulled on the reefer, but he wouldn't say nothing. I felt my stomach turn. Like it do right before my period come. My stomach knot up and not two minutes later the blood rush, but I couldn't move. I was watching him smoke that reefer and thinking how much he ain't look a thing like Penny.

His chin was smooth, for one thing. Old man smooth, but smooth. Not one hair was he gon take my hand across and say, "feel that?" for. "It been too long since you loved me last, Sorren. My whiskers growing." He wasn't gon tell me nothing about his whiskers growing and how that meant I should get in his bed and open up.

Every other man before Lev I found something, one thing, that looked like Penny's. The ears. The eyebrows, the way they bent. The pinky toe. The hands. Them motherfucking hands.

Not nothing on Lev reminded me of Penny. Even his dick was curved, where my daddy's was a straight shot.

I put my hand between my legs fully expecting blood. Wasn't none.

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