

**excerpt from When Pigs Murdered Soup and the World Still Spun
by Andria Nacina Cole**

Soup. Not because he loved beef noodle (he did). Because when Huralee snuck up on him playing dice, with the Westbrook boys (fucking Westbrook boys) in that crackhead coup, he was eight-year-old stunned.

Number one, his mother was this dear Lord pretty you couldn't guard against.

Number two, it was late morning and Monday. He had only just begun toying with his dick, deservedness, the word no, skipping school, and autonomy, so his courage was thin.

Huralee showed up at the 10 o'clock game on a verified/certified/signed for hunch wearing a short black leather skirt aching to get free of her three-child-wide hips with her titties corner hustling for the tiny, itchy space available in her teenage daughter's bra.

She showed up a pretend whore and calling her beloved son names like Bluff and Cotton (but only in her head) on. pure. purpose. Climbed in that homemade shed built for drug dealing and doom, maybe risking her beautiful life, to save her son, but also because she just wasn't scared of shit.

A bubble rose and popped in her momma heart as soon as she saw him. His hair was fresh cut, which meant he was extra lovely. But never mind.

"So this the kinda momma you need young blood?" She ran a thin black hand all along her fancy self then hit the runway. Took these near-reckless steps, tough as a model would, and walked her soul over top seven sleeping fiends—thought *Doc*, *Dopey*, *Grumpy*, *Sleepy*... as she did—til she arrived at the smack middle of the dice game. "How can I scar you good enough that you act right?" She asked him.

This was '88, in a Sandtown alley. It wasn't battle. Call it baby war. Nobody but nobody was keeping Huralee's children from their destinies, not even the children themselves.

And he saw her—beauty and inches and inches of sacred black skin—and thought, *Oh shit*. Of how she'd curse him (meaningfully, only a *fuck* or two). Of hotdogs and beans for a week (the depth of her punishment, though she was toughening).

But most devastatingly, he considered his young, horny, powerful, everyday neighborhood friends calling his demure (usually) momma *whore* and talking bout her in wet dream, on her knees, irrecoverable ways.

He shit standing.

With all four Westbrook boys—Donnie and Twin and Buddha and Kim—watching.

He *shit* standing.

The fugitive chunks that escaped his drawers (his laundry-line, in the wind dried drawers) and skipped down his stick legs (excitedly, like they were headed to carnival) and managed their way out the stitched and unforgiving ankles of his \$80 jeans were: fire orange, the brownest brown, an odd/in the mustard family yellow, and an otherwise wonderful army green. See, he and his sisters (Method was living on his own by then) did not call Huralee's Sunday dinner *dinner*, whatever it was (the night before it was chicken cordon bleu); they called it *justice*. It was that damn good.

Bits of justice gathered in a reckless doo doo broth at his and the other's feet.

Worse things had happened.

So, Soup.

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But all the seven years before Soup, he was called Cliff John Pratt III. Penned so mightily for a father that wasn't his, and who he never knew, and who he never saw—not even in a hand-drawn picture or a motherfucking nightmare.

When Huralee Pratt was Huralee Monroe (from October '47 to summer '65) she day- and night-dreamed about a catalog of Black babies gathered at her hot feet (Huralee wore flip flops across the winter months, even, seeking asylum for them poor feet). Her babies'd be an assortment of complexions—since she was verging on beet-black herself and had her a thing/a sort of compulsion for light-skinned men—wandering and misplacing themselves under the thick hem of her Grandma Robin-sewn skirts.

Except

she lost her

one and only,

particular,

precious,

butter-yellow

tall

husband

to that bitch Vietnam.

She couldn't think or sleep to day/night dream about children for ten entire years.

In the first place, Cliff Pratt Jr. went over there thinking he was Popeye or some shit. To wipe his nigger hands on something lowlier than him. To be the hunter for once.

And when she gave him speeches titled, "This ain't your war, Cliff!"

He countered with, "And Baltimore is?"

Because he was a brilliant man. Never mind his brilliance didn't count.

The Viet Cong killed Cliff Jr. on his first day.

"Can you believe that shit?" Huralee forever said when conveying her widow story.

He stepped his proud, thirsty foot on a tripwire. And a bouquet of bamboo, sanded to thirteen dignified points, entered his tough and soft midsection like a cold knife does an ornery block of bread.

The bamboo was fucking beautiful.

Upon hearing, Huralee's evil was instant (grits). Her lips curled to prove it. But when she buried her husband, having not pushed a single big head baby out her pretty snatch (having barely made much love; she was a virgin when they married, and he'd flung himself into war so dramatically and soon after the wedding), the meanness settled, on top of her like some old hoodoo dust/throughout her like churning, determined blood. She pissed evil out several times a day, because she made sure to get her water, of course. But seeing Cliff Jr. lowered into the dirt at a mere 19, still so damn good looking (they stuffed the gaping hole between heart and crotch with Christmas wrapping paper and fastened his military coat over top of it, snug), gave her a decade's supply of detestation.

To expend it she relived things.

She did not go to Cliff Jr.'s repast, for instance. She went to the library. In her funeral dress. In her funeral shoes. With her funeral hat propped high on her nappy, going to a funeral head. She asked the librarian, a white woman really the color red, for direction.

"I need to know how a nigger is disqualified for war." She said. Sure to look the woman in the eyes (for kick).

But the librarian missed the point and turned no redder. She only licked her two-lines lips, like maybe to taste *nigger?*, and sent Huralee's beet-black ass to the newspapers. (Huralee'd work to shock people in these confrontational ways for many, many months after Cliff Jr. died—

half the time she'd win, but the other half she'd meet assholes bigger than herself and have to snack on defeat.)

A November 15, 1863 New York Times article told her Cliff Pratt Jr. might have been spared war had he:

- Chronic ulcers (she nursed that one, but it wasn't corrupt enough and went away so quick)
- Varicose veins (ain't those for women?)
- Club feet (she giggled, ignorant)
- Total loss of a great toe or a thumb, an index finger of the right hand
- Fractures
- Wounds, burns, or tumors
- Loss of an entire goddamn limb
- Atrophy of both testicles (whoa now)
- Incontinence
- Incurable, permanent organic stricture of the urethra (so the opposite of incontinence?)
- Old and ulcerated internal hemorrhoids (well)
- An artificial anus (*this list better kiss my ass*)
- A hernia
- Abdomen grossly protuberant/excessive obesity (she always did like her a little gut on a man)
- Loss of a sufficient number of teeth, as to prevent mastication of food
- Stammering, if excessive, if confirmed
- Complete loss of tongue
- Great injury or disease of the skull (being Black in America GOT to assault the skull, right?) She felt a solution coming on.
- Partial loss of sight, in both eyes
- Pain...

Oh. Pain. Oh see now pain. See, Cliff knew knew knew knew knew pain. Like how you know the Pledge of Allegiance. Like you just somehow know how to French kiss. Like you know a lover's phone number (backwards, even). Like how nobody gotta teach you to breathe or be Black. "To be Black down there," Cliff'd say, referring to the South, "You just kneel. And don't bother getting up."

For a minimum of 3,476 days following that most useful visit to the library, Huralee relived her young life with the dogged protagonist Pain. It rescued her brilliant husband—a Jr., coulda been a scientist he was so sharp, woulda done fatherhood remarkably—from having his insides dug up. Sweet Cantaloupe.

And with Cliff Jr.'s ghost Huralee Pratt made these kinds of babies:

A boy named Method, for she always liked to paint/had a creative flair;

a girl named Robin, for her grandmother, naturally;

another girl named Rebecca, nicknamed Baby, because she loved how the -cca echoed all over the mouth, but it was too pretty a name and too formal to say all the times she'd need to say it in a day.

And another boy,
the special boy,
named Cliff John Pratt III.

When she woke up out of that Vietnam/angry wind coma (she'd fallen in love again; worse things had happened) she adopted a foster kid mid-pregnancy, renamed him Method, (despite his being seven with a birth certificate that read *Rakim*), made another girl baby on the tail of the first, rested a few years—because, bitch, three kids was in too damn deep; and performed penance for a list of shit she ain't never ever do, just in case.

She needed that last baby to be a goddamn miracle, Dear God.

She named Cliff III for what Vietnam took.

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Now the year Soup was born—1980, nice and even—Black people had eased up offa “pig.” Their murder by police was still sanctioned, still ritual, still like sunrise, Monday, the chorus, a heartbeat, and sin. The poorest of them could: go to church, sing and suffer, play the number, and drink \$3 gin. The working could clean toilets whistling, drive hacks, orgasm, make babies, and laugh (long as the joke was on them). The upwardly mobile could buy houses in particular neighborhoods, become dentists, lease Cadillacs at racist interest rates. But the lot of them (be they children, be they old cloudy-eyed men) could have arranged, in a matter of minutes baby, the splitting (by bullet, club or concrete) the splitting of their fool nigger heads.

'80 was no Harlem Renaissance of cop names, though. Even Baltimore's whores, the pseudonym champs, historically religious and precise (goddamn funny) in their naming of the innocuous and the genocidal, shit, even they were only hollering “Five-O,” “One Time,” “Berries,” “Vice,” “Fizz.” You might hear “Smokey” were they fucking a lot of visiting southern men. “Dick” if they'd just fucked a set of white ones. But the people's passion had run off, after despair. There were pebbles of it in the soles of their shoes. But can't nobody walk with a stupid pebble fooling with the feeling arches of their feet.

In the first place the Black Panther Party had been hung by its Black Power neck. Never mind they'd shot the all mighty King of Love straight through his loving heart and he was already dead twelve and a half years. Then you figure Malcolm and Medgar, the Kennedys, those four little girls, that circle-faced grinning Emmett Till were mere Black liberation ghosts that couldn't be conjured by Jesus or voodoo, no matter the cognac, no matter the prayer.