

excerpt from “Hussy”

The photograph above the television is almost as tall as the wall it hangs from. It, like the television, is black and white, but less black and less white, and some twenty years older. Of her parents standing beside a wedding cake indistinct as the reason they married, it folds in at the corners, despite the frame, as if to hug—or perhaps to choke—itsself. It has hung, unmoved, through a throng of mistresses (bold bitches, slick enough to bring you your cognac in four-inch heels and not spill a drip; not a one old enough to remember King’s murder); through the suicide encouraged by those mistresses; through rape; through the consequent, misplaced, just damn bold and heavy shame; through an illegitimate child neither named nor kept nor spoken of since.

Her father, in a light-colored, well-tailored suit, looks satisfied, and her mother, behind him, duped. Of this picture, he says, “My! Look at Ella. See that look on her face? If that ain’t love, I don’t know what is.” What he ought to say is, “Lord Jesus.”

To the far left of this photograph is a small cut they call the kitchen, but before that is a smaller cut they call *the way*. *Way* and not *hall* or *hallway*, because it is so short and so tight and so narrow it must be incomplete. And if two of them—Aunt Beech and Dot, or Dot and her daddy, or her daddy and Aunt Beech—happen to meet there, they undoubtedly discover a thing. Like what the one had for dinner (breath) and if the other needs more fruit (fart). Breathe and fart and struggle through *the way* to beyond, and find three bedrooms teeming with sadness and secrets and those seven million incessant questions ever-posed but never quite said aloud by the young.

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The year of her birth the bedrooms held eight sleeping bodies on any given night. In the one to the left, the biggest, lay her three oldest sisters—each more ugly than the next. In the one to the far right, the smallest, lay two more. These, on a single twin-sized mattress, the one’s hips casing the other’s behind. But this arrangement must have been divine or at least lucky or maybe

by the time they were born their parents only ever fucked and never made love, because both proved gorgeous and married by their seventeenth year. In the center bedroom: Ella and Lawrence, and squished between them—she herself, Dot.

Oddly pretty, but pretty still, since the fucking lacked all anger come '68.

Outside the windows of these three bedrooms, then and now, near white wilderness and all the rest of Buffalo sit. Not one other girl, ugly or not, has left this house tongue kissed (not even the raped one), let alone a whore.

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Once, when Dot was eight and hurt was touring/touching every part of the house, Aunt Beech pulled her and four of her sisters (all paper bag bright) into the beautiful girls' room. Lawrence was using his Afro and whole man body to course the kitchen floor; Ella was curled into an S on top of the sofa, crying so...strange. They'd just found that Pearl, the third youngest, "had been took." You should have seen Lawrence and his confusion. First he was a thrashing black fool mop. Then he was up on all fours, wailing. Then he was splayed and trembling. Then he was splayed and still. Then he got flat as a Negro bug, begging God to take it back. He kept asking, "Now what good is she?" Like Pearl was some heap of hamburger way far past its cook date. He kept asking, "What good is she?" And Ella kept not answering. Ella was whimpering, sure, and there were tears screening her eyes, but no one saw them fall.

If not for the Smith boy who cared far less about a spoiled wife (the rape brought the unnamed son) than the way she said his name (like it was a risk), Lawrence might've died of grief twenty years too young.

That spectacle, plus Aunt Beech's talk—it was one-sided, and all, "See how precious pussy is?"—made Dot know.

She's suffocating in her momma's wedding dress to lose her virginity, then. Since it should be spectacular.