

## excerpt from *Call On Mercy and a Yellow Cab*

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### List of Characters

<b>May Sr.</b>	Mother to May Jr. and Ren/wife to Dr. Jefferson; suffers from an only-in-the-movies case of amnesia
<b>Clark Teach</b>	May Sr.'s dead daddy; a symbol
<b>Anna</b>	Was May Sr.'s mother; was absolutely smothering
<b>Ren</b>	Daughter to May Sr. and Dr. Jefferson/little sister to May Jr.; currently reading books by the heap and therefore cynical
<b>May Jr.</b>	Oldest daughter of May Sr. and Dr. Jefferson/big sister to Ren; sharp, in a way, but keeps her courage tucked—the sort of flower you ain't inspired to pick
<b>Mr. Gregory</b>	Crackhead child molester trying his damndest not to be
<b>Benjamin</b>	The white boy Ren loves; an impetus
<b>Timmy</b>	Wife to Mr. Gregory; the shade of Black the whole world hates
<b>Dr. Jefferson</b>	Sometimes called just Doctor; sometimes called Lamont; a diabetic ex-drug dealer, newly quadriplegic; husband and father to three quarters of the feminine above

### Text Features

<b>Italics</b>	What May Sr. don't know she knows; the past beyond the present past; thoughts
<b>Missing</b>	
<b>Apostrophes</b>	As in: Mark and em. Em is them, but there's no physical indication this is so, because the physical is disrespectful
<b>Divisions</b>	Titles like “Ninety-Nine” and “Apple” and “The Invention of Rape”; a method for getting a story told; a style

### A Note About Language

Ain't no grammatical mistakes. Ain't no misspellings. Ain't nothing said but how it's supposed to be.

## Ninety-Nine

*Mercy what May Sr. don't remember. She don't remember she scared to death of birds or that she love her daughters. She don't remember she laud a head of nappy hair, for its orneriness, and how good it take a braid. Never mind her nana's Carolina accent—thick. as. veggie. fucking. soup. Or the sweat bee nipped her forehead same summer morning was her daddy Clark Teach's funeral. She don't remember he died one bitch of a summer, Bitch Summer 1978. Was too hot and too violent; had at least eight hundred days packed inside it, which meant, naturally, it passed by too slow. May Sr., speaking of eight, was not yet that. She wasn't but seven and a half calling God on His shit: "It make good sense to take my daddy, Sir? Then turn right around and knot my head too?"*

*But she can't recall.*

*She don't remember she near-drowned at the Clinton Street pool not a full year later. Anybody watching thought her flailing arms begged rescue, but they were signaling heaven. I'm here, I'm here is what they said. When the lifeguard brought her to she said a hundred ninety-nine Nos. When her momma said, "Cut that shit out, May," she said ninety-nine more.*

*She don't remember her favorite color is red because everything wonderful ever happened to her starred it: her period at age nine is one example. The blood rushed her budding woman parts, and then her panties, and then her stockings, her inner thighs, and the toilet, the tips of four warm and curious fingers. It was a wild, stinking rain, an angry red wind her mother apparently smelled. She looked up when Anna busted through the bathroom door, unsurprised (her momma busted through everything), and delighted. Anna had to see her, bent over, fondling her pit, and thought anything but, Ho! High time!*

*May said, "I can have babies already, Momma?"*

*And Anna fainted. She knocked her country head on the bathroom sink. And nothing for ten years straight was better. Not eighth grade graduation, not her first sip of beer, not masturbating gainst Anna's living room pillows and leaving them there for her to sniff and wonder about. Nothing made her happy as stepping over her unconscious mother, un-wiped. She let the blood make a web to almost her knees before she bathed. But she don't remember. She don't even remember she allergic to mayonnaise. She insist on tasting it every Tuesday—Tuna Fucking Tuesdays—and the hives push up through the skin in uninvited/invited heaps.*

*She don't remember she left-handed. Or supposed to be divorced.*

*She certainly don't remember she used to kiss Ren, and May Jr. especially, in the pleats of their necks. So's to tickle them, yes. But really so's to get high off their sour girl scents.*

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## Apple

And after they were seated and caught their breath and thought one thing apiece (Ren thought, *I'll wait til tomorrow to tell her I love him*, and May Jr. thought, *I bet she call herself loving him*) they held hands. They were too old to hold hands—fifteen and sixteen that August and September—but come evening they'd need not to vomit at the sight of their father and to fight their forgetting mother like she was a dog (exhausting things). Holding hands then, was necessary and far more important than Mr. Gregory, who made it his mission to sit across from them any evening they were on the bus together.

Sometimes he couldn't afford the trip—he had a small-price-to-pay addiction that stripped him of things (money and time and looks and feeling)—and sometimes the girls missed the 3:30 defending their skin in the projects. When all went well, though, he was there, saying, “What you nasty high yella bitches holding hands for with your big grown woman selves? You dike sisters?” Saying something to that effect and beating his dick.

But they held on tight. For while they did not know it, they sensed it: from between Ren's knees a dot of blood jumped. It landed in her panties, round and red, dangerous as an apple. And God help her.

Mr. Gregory came in his hand.

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## You Still a Virgin

The girls were light-skinned and filled to their very throats with May Sr.'s memories. Skin, choking secrets, boring brown eyes, big feet (burdens, almost), nappy hair (straightened, it graced their shoulders/bounced here and there, like wheat), an odd love of eggs, and general disapproval of...everything, they shared. But Ren was knocking with both fists at fat's door. And May Jr. was an indolent/hadn't even earned it, skinny. That Ren had had sex with a trash white boy round 12:30 that afternoon was a more distinct distinction.

"How you stand looking at him, Ren? His little pink dick...no, his cock. They don't even have dicks, you know? They got cocks."

She and May Jr. were headed to the bus stop, not five minutes before the handholding and the cumming, on two sets of ashy, knocking, Black girl knees. If they went any faster, the knees would catch fire. They'd burn up and leave two piles of who cares? on the corner of Winslow and Blaine.

"I ain't see it. He just put it in."

"There is a God," was a whisper. But, "so, then it don't count," was a load. May Jr. said that and Ren had to invent courage.

"You still a virgin" killed her worse.

*"Ibledthough."*

Ren could not stand spaces between the words and the wind licking her good and her sister's looking face too, so she admitted to the bleeding in a clump, which she sometimes did with language.

May Jr. stopped. No matter they couldn't afford it. She grabbed her sister by her thick wrist and tried seeing her. The eye shadow May Sr. had agreed to just that Sunday—she'd said, "of course," but in her sleep, and in no way knowing the packaging called the color *Smut*—was swallowed up by the stare. She was back plain. A high yellow girl, yes, but nothing special. Twin to the dandelion skin (not a bit of thrill) were those old regular brown eyes anybody, everybody had. She'd have to lean on her words for color.

"*Fuck*, Ren! What was you thinking? Did it get in your panties?"

"No! No, no, no. I washed up good. My panties is clean as this morning."

"Washed up? Where?"

"In the girls' bathroom. The private one on the third floor. Next to Ms. Donovan's class. With a paper towel and some soap out the dispenser."

Ren put the gaps back between her words because she knew her sister like she knew all of Corinthians—she wasn't mad a bit. May Sr. said, "Or do you not know that wrongdoers will

not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor practicing homosexuals,” any morning the girls deserved it. And May Jr. only asked questions when she was worried, not when she was estimating. Funny thing.

“If not,” May Jr. said. “If any bit of him, or you, landed in them panties, it’s your turn to die.”

And Ren wanted to be afraid, she did. May Sr. could be at the height of irreverence just then. She could be fresh off a talk with their quadriplegic daddy—he could have been carefully arranging his wonder since breakfast: “You know girls is fucking *way, way* earlier in this day than you did in yours, right? Hell, remember how old you was when you first fucked Rick Jackson? Of course you don’t.”

Their momma could be prepped good, sitting on a high, neat horse, wearing justification like a skirt, her mouth cocked and set to spit, “Lie back. I’m a make sure.”

But she couldn’t get scared. One: she’d fucked a trash white boy right on top of the carpet in a back, but not too far back, corner of the library, AND NOBODY’D SEEN. Two: Benjamin’d said, “I love you” the moment he pulled out, where May Sr. promised he’d yell “whore” and run, as if recently diseased. Three: she was reading *Brown Girl, Brownstones* and watching its adults break apart, like toast, to crumbs. And especially four: May Jr. was not ashamed.

So she got greedy. So she needed to know what else exactly her mother was dead wrong about. She was emptied fear and suddenly courage and wrath in big girl panties.

May Sr. was kicked off her high, neat horse in a gesture so quick and so complete Ren couldn’t do what she should: plan.

But the 18 was just a few blocks back. It’d be there any second. The girls ran to make up for the pause.

May Jr. hollered over the sounds of their rushing, “Let there be something in your underwear...we gon have to poison momma to keep her off you!”

They beat the bus by a yard.

Ren was knocking with both fists at fat’s door and always giving up her breath for such things, but May Jr. was built like a pipe. Air split through her quick and easy.

Except when she saw Mr. Gregory. Then it got caught at the top of her neck where all May Sr.’s memories gathered. Strangled her some.

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## Shit Pissed

Mr. Gregory got off at the stop after he climaxed, wherever it was. At the gas station on Fillmore was convenient, since he could clean up in a private, if filthy, space. He had to wash before he got home else his scratching wife would read him—

“You musta fucked something.”

“What you always scratching for, Timmy? One day...”

“I’ma find what I’m itching for?”

“Indeed.”

And Timmy would remind him for an hour at least all the reasons she hated him. The superficial ones: his tongue was too long; it was too eager; it flopped around inside her mouth like a foot. What woman he ever kissed wanted that? The serious: he wasn’t a provider, he couldn’t spell protect. And the profound: “With you, I am one evil woman. I turn hateful the moment your shoe hit the step. You come in a room, and my spirit fly out, shit pissed.”

This day he was fortunate to get off at Fillmore. It was cold and the gas station wasn’t but a jump from Hector Street. Also, the bathroom was around back, behind the store, and always unlocked. If he climaxed by Genesee, he had to ask the cashier at the Sunoco for a key. Had to ask with semen dried or maybe not in the crevices of his hands. However it laced him—dry or drying—he found it all so...nasty. He found masturbating to the sight of little girls nasty, too, but he couldn’t help that. That they were, what? 14? 15? That the short one’s stomach hung over her uniform skirt, a fat garden. That they couldn’t manage cute with light skin and all that damn hair even. That they appeared neglected—not in dress, no, but in posture. And never answered him back, no matter how he called them. That he called them *cunt* and *dike* and *dike bitch*, mostly under his breath, but sometimes not. All of that made him sick, and yet he couldn’t stop. Any day he could, he chased the 18, paid its fare, sat across from them, unlatched his belt, dug in his pants for his itty bitty dick, pushed it and pulled it and pushed it and pulled it, and then wet anything in its wake (usually just his corduroys—he rarely wore briefs) with the mess a 52-year-old poorly built part-time dope fiend makes—half what he managed at 20: an eighth of an eighth of heaven. He couldn’t help it.

Dirty and compact and holy, the bathroom was beautiful structure for a give-too-much, take-too-much man. Consistently, Mr. Gregory offered dick and touch nobody wanted. Consistently, he welcomed abuse, and by the bucket. So, he praised small spaces. They felt like nothing could be changed. They felt like church and hard candy and hallelujah.

But he avoided the mirror. And in place of his short, ugly, balding, mahogany black reflection sung an old Negro spiritual his grandfather, also a Gregory, but not a Mr., taught him. (Somehow, almost organically and immediately following his first rape—he was thirteen—he became “Mr.”, and skipped mirrors, even if it meant breaking his own thieving neck.)

First, he rinsed his Mr. mouth clean.

Then he checked his Mr. watch. Twice.

He stretched his Mr. arms so far wide open he looked like Lucifer tripped and falling out the sky.

He rolled his Mr. shoulders back and boxed the air.

He untied and retied his Mr. shoes.

Eventually, he stood still, to see.

And sure enough, the dope called. In big ways and little by little. His brain beat against his head, for instance, while hangnails, healed, hadn't bothered him the whole day, pulsed. The craving might have knocked him over, might have sent him to the pawn shop to sell his Mr. watch, had he not put all his weight into pouting, demanding of God things.

“Explain this life here, won't you?” He said. And, “How come?” “When this shit gon be over?” “Soon?” “Anytime soon?” He ignored the knock at the door with the same ferocity God ignored him, and wanted—for a long and difficult time—to get violent. Not until he struck the roof of his mouth with his flopping foot tongue, accidentally, could he get back to somewhat ordinary. The gesture, the feelings married to it, made him think of Timmy. Not the striking, per se. But the tongue itself. Not the roof. But its texture. He got still and loved, loved, loved the dirty bathroom space—a wholesome moment between this nasty thing and the next. And after cracking a few knuckles and studying the hands responsible for so much harm—self and otherwise—he went on home.

The craving passed. But no easier than a kidney stone.

“Where you been?” Timmy asked him.

And somehow, hearing that same old question spit so mean out that same old mouth the same old way was different. This time it made Mr. Gregory know he was ready to touch one of those light-skinned girls. Nasty or whatever, he needed to feel them. Even the fat one. Beating his dick just wasn't cutting it.

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## Richard Pryor

*And then May Sr. 's first time making love was red. She was sixteen. It was with Rick, who kissed her slow, and walked her as close to home as he could after. Mercy what she don't remember. She don't remember she loved him so bad that when her mother told her the relationship was "finished...should have never, ever even started," she slit her wrists the right way and stood up straight with her arms dangling, like a monkey, long as she could, to make two religious hills of burgundy on Anna's bedroom floor. The stains pushed past the carpet into the faux wood beneath and never lifted, not for bleach or duty or time...*

*After she and Rick'd finished, she didn't have a minute to clean herself. But when she could finally step out of her panties, she saw in their crotch not the cum, dried, it matched the cotton, but the roundest, reddest, bravest bit of blood. She didn't wash the drawers ever. And the thought of Anna finding them (she only kept them in her second drawer, her underwear drawer) and dying at their sight kept her happy a year. And then when Anna did find them, and in July (no month redder) and came for her—when she was watching Richard Pryor, on the sun porch, in the dark, volume low-low, not supposed to—with scissors and needle and thread, saying shit like, "Patch you up," and "Yella whore, what?" May Sr. turned those scissors on her very own mother and stabbed her, deeply, but only in the thigh, and watched the blood grow and grow and loved with her knuckles and pubic hairs and all her other odd parts and her common ones too, the ugly spilling of it...then she knew she loved the color red like you love a man. But she don't remember. She don't remember Anna sent her away after that and she lost the young love of her life behind the journey. She came back from Philly a year later and Rick was in love with Big Donna with the cancer-shaped mole eating at her eye.*

*She don't even remember she hate her husband, though, and would have divorced him nine days after the car wreck (he ripped the papers to nothing soon as she asked him, "And who is you?"). She don't remember her six times tables or the Little Bo Peep rhyme. She don't remember she supposed to say, "I love you" back or which soap is for dishes and which is for clothes (May Jr. labels em). She don't remember she can skate like a dream. Or sew. Not that she can whistle. That she can fuck a man dumb. That she think children are for protecting. That the Bible is dangerous reading in the wrong hands. She don't remember the names of her fingers, even: not the pinky or the pointer or the middle, not the thumb. Certainly, not the fourth. She think ring is only what the telephone do. And when she hear it, she never remember to pick it up anyway. She only say, "What's that noise there?" And run through the house looking.*

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### An Accidental Coping

“A white boy, though? His teeny weeny white boy hands?”

Mr. Gregory was gone. They could talk without mumbling, feeling sluttish.

“His hands the size of any boy’s, May Jr.”

“No they ain’t. I seen em. You tell me how one corner—one!—of your big ass butt fit in them? What you do with his mouth, Ren? How you kiss a hole? Put your huge black girl lips round his tiny white boy ones? Act like they a soda can? Slurp?”

They’d be at Butler in three minutes, maybe less. These questions had to be purged and burned and swept up, and the feelings behind them settled before they turned Brunswick’s corner.

“His lips is soft.” Ren was a little tired defending Benjamin, but then she liked reliving touch.

“No they ain’t. I seen his lips. He talked to me out those lips. They always fixed to bleed.”

The sisters laughed. A good habit—salting fights, anything like drowning, anything make you wanna die, with a joke. Their daddy’d just lost both his arms, to the shoulder, because he refused to manage his diabetes, for instance. And this, after losing both feet and then both legs, past the knee. Laughing kept them a step ahead crazy. By the time they were eleven and twelve, maybe three months after May Sr. crashed her car and forgot love, they’d laughed at God-awful things 83 times. It was an accidental coping.

“It’s me gotta kiss him, May Jr. Not you.”

“That’s the whole and *entire* truth.” May Jr. said. “You won’t never, ever, ever catch no trash white boy with his ready to bleed lips on me. Hell no.”

“You kissed Maney.”

“Maney ain’t trash, and Puerto Rican is a million-one miles off white.”

“That’s true, but they different too.”

“They don’t hate us.”

“Sure they do.”

The bus was coming up on Brunswick Street. Should they want to, they could touch the silence. Rip it. Cup it. Toss it between them.

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## A Bit of God

Jesus. And the other carpenters. Judges. That they may snatch, grip, bang the gavel quick. Truck drivers. A steering wheel whipped here and then there with this hand. An orange juice spiked to the hilt in that. Pimps. How else to break whore bone? Blues singers, with their boo hoo hoo depressing selves (the mic must sit like a princess in either palm). Writers, naturally. Surgeons, of course. And grocery clerks too. How else to lift the bags and give them to old ladies wrinkly as the sea? Plumbers. Barbers. Firemen. Dish washers. Bell hops. But who more than a cook?

To hold like he loves it, a Pyrex, over a project stove's flame, til all the hundred plus some grams bubble. And then to set the thing aside and cradle his hips, thin-thin, as it cools. To drop in the glass cup, baking soda (AKA a bit of God), and ice—just the one cube, perhaps and maybe the two. To dial, while the coke, soda, God and ice marry, May, his woman, sitting home, like she's supposed to. May, the mother of his two girls, one of whom she was vain enough to name Junior. To yell at her, through his mouth, naturally, but to confirm the anger with whichever pointer finger is free. To hang up the phone with the force only a five-digit hand owns. And then to scrape the sides and depths of the jar, to pile its delight yay high on a paper towel. He'd only need eyes to watch the crack dry, but then to break it up, to weigh it, to bag it, to pass it, thousands and thousands of times, for thousands and thousands of dollars, to the fiends? He would need attentive, precise, gifted, on the verge of motherfucking magic hands.

So then when, on January 23 of this very year, Dr. Lamont Jefferson (called Doctor because he could heal, or at least soothe, an addict with his skill) had amputated his upper arms, from which his elbows poked, from which his forearms swung, from which his exquisite hands chopped, assessed, packaged, and delivered the city's best goddamn crack (even from a wheelchair)...he became a rotting tree. Which would have been okay, but he was a man.

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### One Roller, Missed

May Sr. waited for her daughters on the front porch in an ordinary/extraordinary housecoat, with one curler, missed, in her hair. In addition to being dirty, ugly, flowered, stiff, too big, and flung wide the hell open (she wore a nude-for-white-girls underwear set beneath) the robe was an unfunny joke. It was the answer to 353 days worth of these phrases here: “get out the house more,” “contribute some,” “part-time at least,” and “please Doctor, please.”

Dr. Jefferson had given it to her for Christmas one year.

1983. And all the protest she could muster was filth. She never washed it. Not once in twelve years. Even her missing memory wouldn't interfere. Some instinct (she felt it best in her hands, but her chest threw a small fit, too) said the dirt was...important. Anytime she went to wash the thing her body confessed its whole sad history. But her mind could not remember to understand it.

Her face was made up with her weak right hand (beautifully) too.

May Sr. waited for her daughters on the front porch, in an ordinary/extraordinary housecoat, with one roller, missed in her hair.

Which meant the evening *could* be easy. Dinner could be on the table, and not packed in its pots, or chewed and spit, all four servings (Dr. Jefferson, peas, and a where-the-fuck-are-my-limbs temper tantrum? A goddamn nightmare!) across the dining room floor. Their father might be watching television not wishing for feet, or worse, hands. The curtains could be drawn. The house could know no natural light and May Sr.'s candles could have burned themselves from this to that. All through the house could be the good stink they'd leave and she loved so much. Could be.

“May Sr.? What if the neighbors see you?”

May Jr. was close enough to know her mother was sharing with folks too much of her titties, her thighs, her svelte mid-section. Ren trailed, and her daydream about Benjamin's skipped lips attending to her like a bird the fattest worm made her miss the spectacle entirely. Though she could've guessed it.

May Sr. said, “Anybody on this street that ain't never got a whiff of a woman—here you go!” And twirled in too many circles, her arms calling them to see. She almost fell off the porch, but nobody was watching. May Jr. managed to talk her into the house by asking about Corinthians—“But, how do this fit into the scheme of things?”

It would be a wonderful time inside. May Sr. was in one of those post-Dr. Jefferson's amputations moods—loud and full and heavy with benevolence. Packed to its very rim with

laughter, just almost and nearly...sexy—right there bumping its head against it. If you studied her, you'd see some old time conceit—a remnant of the woman big and bad enough to name a child the same as her, the husk of a woman sharp enough to get beat/raped/talked to like a piece of shit beyond a decade, but fuck no, not for nothing—she'd stashed three hundred thousand of Dr. Jefferson's drug money across sixteen years (mercy, what she don't remember). It would be a good time inside.

Meanwhile, Ren had arrived at another memory. Her first love's semen spilled just above her fat thighs. There was the thought of its thickness. And right behind that, its heat. She couldn't enjoy it, though. She was at the house's first step.

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## **Kneel Low**

*Mercy what television and a conniving husband will do. Should a wife drive the dead wrong way on the 33 going 65, not drunk or anything, just crying hysterically over being beaten up in front of her children again. Should she be hysterical and confused and drive on up the off ramp. Should she be unlucky enough to meet a car—a sugar white cutlass—midway and lucky enough to swerve in time not to murder or commit her own suicide, just to have a heart attack, and wedge herself between the guardrail and a slowing up pick up truck. Should that blessing of not being made a killer after just taking a flock of fists to her head be guaranteed only by the loss of her young (and a good chunk of her building) memory, here is what TV and the man she married shall arrange in its place:*

*Be pretty. And if you can't, fake. Read your bible. Any part that will keep you barefoot, in a kitchen, at the market, nodding, kneeling (both in prayer and in honor of the mighty dick), starved, or half-awake. Raise your daughters with the worst possible scenario in mind. Make death the goal. Remind them their skin means little, that their hair gracing their shoulders is not grace at all; it's gratuitous. Note the too wide width of their noses. Encourage them to pinch them small, at least. Know that they are some sneaky little things. That lie, cheat, steal. Count anything they touch. Shit, count their bras and underwear. And don't let me catch you gossiping with them, you hear? That's not a thing good mothers do.*

*Do you have a mother? Of course you don't.*

*Must mothers and daughters always bicker?*

*Yes.*

*Is it safe for girls to tremble when their mother enters the room?*

*It's natural.*

*And I'm supposed to check their panties for things? You're sure?*

*Absolutely.*

*But listen. Back then, before, when I remembered and was whole...did we love each other good? Me and you?*

*Indeed we did. Look up love in the dictionary; you gon find me and you there. May and Lamont. Me, I'ma have on a Kangol. You, you gon have a wild bush fro.*

*That's nice. But what about this scar? Above my eye? And this one here? Along my forehead?*

*What? That faint, can't hardly see it almost-line? You fell out the bed. You was clumsy.*

*Always.*

*But that ain't important.*

*Be pretty.*

*And read your bible.*

*Kneel low.*

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## 1982

Mr. Gregory and Timmy ate dinner like dinner was war. Mr. Gregory sipped his Pepsi, so then Timmy gulped hers. Timmy gulped, so then Mr. Gregory burped. Timmy clipped a pat of butter from the stick, for her potatoes probably, but she couldn't put it where she wanted before Mr. Gregory split that bitch down the middle. He took all that butter off that stick (he only had a forkful of potatoes left...where was it headed?) and Timmy was just offended. She went to the kitchen, leaned on the sink and breathed, rather than give the battle her beautiful, ugly words.

For sure, she was worth a gawk,  
if not a furious nod,  
failed knees,  
inelegant feet.

Her granddaddy, Clarence Meeks, only spoke to tell the truth, and it was the rare occasion he let the words “Timmy”, “grandbaby”, or “pretty” tumble cross his tongue without a “Good Lord” buttoned to them.

Structurally, God had done brilliant things with the woman, had been just fucking audacious. A nose big and strong enough to ruin a lesser face claimed its space smack in the middle of hers, and with the widest, the widest composure. She had huge eyes buried behind two crops of climbing, damn frightening lashes. Her hair was a kingdom of naps. To see a pair of cartwheel earrings hung below that?

But Black people, all people, get meaner and meaner the further down the color line you trip. Should you be near white, passing, tragically passing, light-skinned, urine-colored, summer red, winter red, brown-skinned with a yellow shining/hollering beneath, God bless you.

Timmy, though, was so Black she was blue. Piano-colored, at least. Coming up on midnight, minimum. And somehow, Mr. Gregory Smith, way back in '82, figured he could love her.

It was this somehow love she was working to remember. But her elbows were perched on a leaking, stained, this *GOT to be* the ghetto sink. And it interfered.

Where she might have considered their first kiss—no flopping foot tongue escaped from its cage, just his plump, greedy lips run across her mouth, the right amount of wet, polite, attentive and eager—she gaped at the water spot, humongous now (it had grown like a baby) beneath the faucet's drip. Where Mr. Gregory's 1982 love might have sustained her some, with its grit and its nerve, a flashback from September mortgaged her head.

She had opened the hall closet, in search of her beige pumps and an umbrella, but instead found her 52-year-old husband there—sitting cross-legged and crouched, smoking crack cocaine out a jar not completely licked of its sardines.

Instead of love, Timmy remembered she worked two jobs because Mr. Gregory worked none. And gray hairs kicked themselves out her head in everyday tantrums, since she never really knew if the motherfucker was coming home or not.

Instead of love, Timmy remembered the nigger robbed her more often than the seasons come!

She peeled backward off the sink, and pivoted (was maybe even pushed). She burst in the dining room like a goddamn trumpet.

“You is one silly nigger!” She hollered at the back of her husband’s crackhead.

“So what you call the bitch that married me then?” He had a string of pork chop dangling between a pair of his top teeth.

“Smart.” Timmy told him, and collected a short stack of dishes in the blue-black crook of her arm.

“Smart how?”

And thrown somewhere between the volatile exchange, was a couple’s sigh. Timmy was relieved to forget the love. Mr. Gregory the dope.

“Nigger, I got three life insurance policies on you.” She said. “I count the days like this here: Thank you, Dear God Jesus! Another day, and another and another closer to my joy...”

Normally, Mr. Gregory would try topping her. Now and then he could. His sometimes wit was the reason Timmy could still get drunk enough to fuck him, and all the time regret it. Every once in a while, when the moon was full, he was a smart mouth bitch, who despite not being able to keep a job and dabbling in whatever drug and having a dick barely big as that pat of butter still sitting and refusing his mound of potatoes (forget his flopping foot tongue) could talk her out her drawers.

But never mind an itching, scratching wife, never mind butter, his addiction, even. Mr. Gregory had the fucking of little girls to consider. He ain’t say a mean thing in return.

*Perhaps, he thought, a little dick is better?*

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## Inch Baby

May Sr. was fine. Dinner was fine. There was, though, this one, small, tiny, little inch baby of a thing.

She was taking her fingers through her hair, latching on places and breathing big when she landed on the roller. She said, “Looka here,” and winked at the girls. She missed the courage stacked in New Brave Ren’s shoulders (bricks) completely/saw but ain’t care a bit about the eye shadow scribbled across May Jr.’s lids. Finding the roller must have unanchored her more, too, because she cracked three good jokes in a row and didn’t come a part when Ren, ignoring the wink, told her, “Momma, please.” The fourth joke, the crass one, asked Dr. Jefferson to clap, but he wasn’t bothered either. He had been sipping on whiskey since morning time and planned on begging May Sr. to make love with him when the girls went onto sleep. (To go from the certainty of rape to the desperation of wonder? A leap, honey! A leap).

But May Sr. was fine. Dinner was fine. Minus the one, small, tiny, little inch baby of a thing. Ren and this new wisdom was all. This boys, even white boys, can love you idea. It was a song and a rush and a rigorous knowing, which meant she could not help saying—

May Jr. had a good three teeth tucked and pulling at a turkey wing;

Lamont was paying all his attention to the ceiling, asking God why did He make whiskey so *gotdamn* sweet?;

May Sr. was smiling a wild, silly, oblivious smile, her fork raised—

“So then, you don’t remember Daddy used to knock you upside your head Momma?”

What a careful, complete, color red way to stun.

In honor of May Sr.’s memory—gone four, five years by then;

in honor of Dr. Jefferson’s mighty, mighty, missing limbs;

in honor of the feeling children feel when their mother

is cursed,

is struck,

is flung,

is spit at,

is bully pinched,

is stomped,

is kicked—

the family hummed.

May Jr. returned the turkey wing to its plate first, but she couldn't convince a jaw to chew. Dr. Jefferson lowered his only limb left, but the gesture was, if not noble, then mute. May Sr. let her lips go on and close, over her were wild, were silly, were oblivious teeth. Those adjectives dead now, she needed new ones, with heat.

Dr. Jefferson was powerless and counting on pussy, though. And no hi-yella, nappy-headed, knocking with two fists at fat's door, bold outta nowhere child was fucking with pussy. Never mind maybe noble, never mind mute. The idea of a rock hard dick and nothing to force it through put him back in his half body.

He told Ren, "You girl...shut the fuck up."

But there was the beginning of wisdom and bloom anyway.

May Sr. was thinking one, small, tiny, little inch baby of a thing.

She was thinking two, only-a-syllable words: *Say* and *what? Say what?*

And imagining, from dust, for she had no reference, her husband taking his used-to-be fist to her head. She gripped the fork, like to kill it.

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### Postage Stamp Neat

*How to get the girls off the bus, though? Or do you separate em? Take em both, fuck em one at a time, let the unfucked one watch? What do little fat girl pussy feel like anyway? And say they get to screaming? What to do then? You supposed to use them condoms the young boys use or what? They gon strip you of the feeling? Ain't that what Young Mike said? And how the fuck do you get washrags and rope and tape and shit like that out a house got a wife with eyes at the front, the back, and the side of her swift head?*

Maybe wives sense sin and anguish running loose and fragile cross their fiending husband's skin.

Mr. Gregory was sitting, postage stamp neat, on their sagging living room couch, the opposite of blessedness trapped in his looking eyes. He had a gate of moisture guarding his old chin and his old cheeks and all the other old things on his thinking face. Timmy had on pajamas already. Blue-skinned and blooded, barefooted, her kingdom of naps braided and just potential now, she circled him like he had a wound out.

Coming out of the third lap she asked him, "But what the fuck *for*?"

Voice as clear as pain. Beauty all out of place. (To be so unhappy in such a loveless marriage, walking that unhappiness around a soiled couch you keep so your crackhead husband can't sell it. It ain't fit.)

"What for *what*?" Mr. Gregory turned his face up at her, with a bit of boldness and some destiny too.

"What *is* you living for?"

You ever asked yourself that, Gregory?

You ever looked

at your sorry

fucking

reflection

in the fucking mirror

and

wondered

*what the fuck for?*"

Not in the mirror, no. But of course he had.

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