

## Blue Wind Witch

This is your eighth month and we're fifty miles out of Houston on our way home to Louisiana where I want you to be born, and something under the hood is thumping. Your daddy, Bluejay, is being real quiet on this Highway I-10 East. It seems like we've been driving this secondhand wreck for weeks. There's plenty of legroom but I can't get comfortable because of my stomach. My feet ache as if they had no home at all. I lean against the window, letting the wind tug at the lace collar of my maternity blouse.

"Now what?" Bluejay switches off the radio, and the thumps change into tawks. "I'm guessing that's either the fan belt or the engine block. It sure as hell better not be the steering column." He rubs at the smear of yellow paint on his jeans. "Two months of our sweat equity for this car. Two months of trimming bushes, black flies in our eyes, two months of mulch for this heap of junk. I should turn around and settle with Neely's Used Cars. I'll whoop that old man."

"Let's just go on, Bluejay." I think but don't say that I suffered more of those black flies than he did, not to mention the red ants.

The lemon-meringue-colored Mercury Marquise started to rattle miles back. We drove through a 3:00 A.M. thunderstorm and when we tried to buzz the electric windows up they stuck. Later we stopped to fill the thermos with coffee at a U-Tote-Em and discovered the yellow paint was washing away.

I'm muttering under my breath, trying to tell you things, so you'll already know them when you get here. I'm seventeen, almost eighteen, while your daddy is twenty-five. We intend to marry but Bluejay is being a *peunez*, stinkbug, about all that. I grew up in New Orleans East. Someday I'll take you by the blue boarding house where we lived for free because my mama ran the place. You can't miss the four-story house painted blue on the corner of Blue Street, which isn't much longer than an alley, but to me it was the whole earth and part of the blue sky that had given birth to the cypress and moss trees, to my father's sheet rocking truck, to the blue crabs we fished for with string and safety pins, and the blue doves that sang me up. When I asked where I came from my mother laughed, but my first brother teased that I had been belched from the mud and brought to Blue Street in a *bigarno's* shell. My second brother said I was dropped from a blue heron's pouch and the gut and mash fed me by that bird made my eyes red and my legs yellow. I knew they were liars, that blue was the beginning of all things. Of course, you already know about the blue wind witch being the bringer of life, you know everything, and I promise when you're born I won't make you forget.

Bluejay brings his fist down on the dashboard, and believe it or not, the plastic shatters and both of us start to laugh. "We're idiots, do you believe this? The minute the Marquise belonged to us it started falling apart. I hope the wheels stay on." He takes a swig from the gallon jug of Coke that rests on the seat between us. "Dotty, pour me another cup of coffee and put some sugar in it."

By sugar he means meth, and he's already too hyped up. He's smoking one cigarette after another. "Let's stop somewhere and sleep," I suggest.

"On what? Our New Orleans money?" He reaches into his shirt pocket for a Kool King.

"We could pull over onto the shoulder or find a rest stop."

"And let the rain hit us through the windows?"

My eyelids are heavy but you're awake kicking, you try to swim. I know you're going to be a girl because the inside of my stomach itches; you already have a full head of hair. When I scratch my belly, Bluejay's fingers encircle my wrist.

"I can't stand that, Dotty." The nerve in Bluejay's cheek jumps.

"Close your eyes then, Mister." I don't want you to hear your father's negativity. You're hearing more than vibrations, the nerve endings in your ears are connected and you know my voice and his. I

scratch again.

“Animals do that,” he snaps, making a big pout.

“That’s a good enough recommendation for me,” I answer.

He shifts away from me on the seat. I have a secret but since I can tell you everything, here goes. Since my seventh month I’m not as addicted to his touch. He pretends not to notice that when he goes quiet, rolling away from me in the bed, I don’t follow after him. I don’t kiss his shoulders ten times each. Whenever he thinks he needs to calm me down, he doesn’t probe my mouth with his tongue, swirling it over my gums. In the old days he’d do that and I belonged to him, to turquoise, that blue green swimming backwards feeling, moonlight on the water, air bubbles popping.

“Babe, that scratching just makes me nervous. After you fix my coffee, you rest.”

I open the glove box and set the cup from the thermos on the lid.

“Put in a bunch of sugar this time,” he tells me, crushing his empty pack of Kools and reaching under the seat for another pack.

I fill the cup with coffee that fried on a burner most of the night. Bluejay unzips his shaving kit and hands me the baggie filled with rice and another smaller bag inside that. Like a Venus fly trap. The razor is stuck to the glove box by a wad of bubble gum. I cut the bag and scrape the once off-white meth, now melted yellow honey, into the coffee. I stir with the razor blade. This honey makes the coffee stink like cat piss and apples.

“Thanks, babe,” Bluejay says, taking the thermos cup from me and gulping. “Christ almighty, that coffee’s so stiff it’s kicking. Are you trying to kill me?” He flips on the interior light, one of the few switches that still works, so I can run the Bic lighter over the baggie to melt it shut. Your father’s eyes look like holes in the trees, red and unblinking although one of his eyes is hazel and the other dark brown, wild about to fly out of his head, ready to leave civilization behind. If I tell him he looks deranged he’ll say I’m no fun, and that I used to drink sweetened coffee with him and jack my jaws all night. It’s the drug of the universe, stars, the nebula, Mars, black holes, gamma rays, everything operates on increased velocity, a shortcut in no living man’s head.

I’ve known your father since I was seven years old. My older brothers had found a new best friend in Bluejay, a boy from Jamaica who spent part of his summers in the Big Easy, an orphan whose older sister lived in the two rooms under us. I was frightened of his name. Bluejay. Even then, I knew I might someday fall in love with him. “A pretty boy,” the women buying beignets would say, shaking their heads. “He’ll be a beautiful man. Pity the girls.” Bluejay loved my mother’s gingerbread cookies. His reddish skin darkened in the sun to become all the spices in her recipe. Nutmeg, cinnamon, brown sugar, ginger, cloves, vanilla extract, his chest glowing, full lips and wide nose, his hair, the same color as his skin, grew any which way. My mother warned my brothers away from him after the three of them were caught poaching white alligators. “He’s *possédé*, hot-blooded. Like Louisiana red sauce. He’ll burn your mouth.” All the bloods mingled in his veins: the African, the European, and the Mongoloid. He’d wear white shirts that he ransacked from a laundry’s garbage can. I was ten years old the last time he visited. When I met him again years later, I was carrying so many platters of smoked duck bisque and lump crabmeat I didn’t recognize him, the only silver suit in the room.

I smell fire in the ashtray, and brush the smoke away from my face.

“Dotty, empty that ashtray. I can’t jam another one in there.”

“I’m not your servant. Besides they’re your butts, Bluejay.”

His foot stays pressed to the accelerator and then lifts and taps the gas; the movement of the Mercury is like a grasshopper sparrow, nervousness full of fits and starts. He flings the whole ashtray out the window. Bluejay laughs, the feel-good powder must be seeping into his blood. When he grips the steering wheel his fingers look cut off at the knuckles from clutching. Then they remind me of a *tooloulou*, a fiddler crab. Bluejay swallows the rest of his coffee sweetened with crystal meth. I put the seat back and

try to get comfortable, my body trickling with sweat. The air conditioner isn't broken, but with all the windows down it doesn't make a difference. I can hear the cloudiness out there, the night heat. One of my legs aches and the other one cramps. You fill up the space in my uterus now, and you're practicing widening your eyes and breathing. Your brain is growing faster than your lungs. I hardly recognize my outside, my expanding stomach, squiggly lines where the hems in my skin were taken out to stretch. I waddle like a *grand beedé*, a fat clumsy man, and can't wait for the four weeks to be up when I'll be light on my feet.

Then the lights of Beaumont's refineries come at us like a covey of blue doves and red-billed streamer tails. Alive, the plants distilling oil and gas. Spheroid tanks, chimney stacks, and gigantic cooling towers inhaling and exhaling enormous breaths, strung with orange and green flashers, sphinxes of our own age sending messages into space.

Bluejay is running his head about the wickedness of the big oil companies. "They're robber barons, Dotty. You better hold your breath, babe, because this isn't air. This is sulfur dioxide. Do you know why no one gives a damn about this poison air? Guess who lives around these refineries? You won't find a white for miles."

"You're making poison air in here. The baby will probably have asthma."

"Babe, since when have you quit smoking?"

"Since eight months ago if you haven't noticed."

The wind coming in all four windows is tearing my hair, and again he asks for coffee and for me to sweeten it. He wants me to feel good too, to drink some with him. I don't want to hurt the baby. He frowns, a crease appearing in his forehead. He grinds his teeth, turns the radio on and off, and takes out a new cigarette, until the car feels like a heart beating too fast. The sun is just bleeding into the sky as we cross the Louisiana state line. I clap and remind Bluejay to stop for a *Times-Picayune*. I'll run through the rental ads before we hit New Orleans.

"Bluejay, maybe we can get a house in Metairie or Gretna. They're still cheap shotguns to be had." Someday we'll have an apartment in the Garden District, we'll eat at Galories, coat our teeth with espresso chocolate mousse and nibble crawfish *étouffée*, only I'll ask for it without the crawfish, and the turtle soup au sherry without the turtle, seafood gumbo without the lobsters. You're teaching me. "Or would you prefer a two bedroom apartment?" I ask.

His jaw clenches. "The money we have, babe, isn't going to go up in smoke for rent."

"Where are we going to live, Mister? In this car?"

"What's wrong with living for free with your mama?" Bluejay asks like I'm the one being gumbo.

"I don't want to go back to that old boarding house I grew up in."

"She's got more room than she knows what to do with."

"She knows exactly what to do with that room. She rents it. She needs the cash," I say, sticking out my lower lip. "I want our own place."

"I have plans for that money. It's our stake. Do you think I can support you and the baby by mowing lawns and killing weeds?"

What about the weeds I pulled, the ones that popped up overnight and fought to drink the flowerbed's water, the ones that wouldn't take no you can't grow here for an answer?

Bluejay expects me to argue and when I don't, he squeezes my hand, and says, "I've talked to Valentino. We can triple *our* money."

I hate the name Valentino, the Mafia person-in-charge of Orleans and surrounding parishes—Allen, Washington, Ascension, Ouachita, West Baton Rouge, East Baton Rouge, East Feliciana, Livingston, Calcasieu, Jefferson, St. Tammany, and Tangipahoa. He has his fingers in the swamp tours and gambling riverboats. Everyone knows who he is when his name appears in the paper. That old bull neck fishes for young men, Pier 90 and Bayou Lafitte are his waterside roosts. Mama's told me Valentino's

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got *envie*, a craving for girls, boys, men, women. To him people are no different than crawfish. Then I feel the urge to pee, like I'm about to blow up. You must be on my bladder, your fist or foot against my stomach.

"Bluejay, stop, I have to go." My voice is high-pitched. "I'm going to explode."

He lets his foot off the accelerator and eases the Marquise onto the shoulder. "Wait there, babe," he says, "you might lose your balance. I'll come around and help."

He's sorry for cursing me; I can hear it in his tone. This is the part about Bluejay I love, the old-fashioned gentleman. After he puts the flashers on, he runs around to my door, holding it, and reaching for me. He might be escorting me into the swankiest restaurant in the Quarter, the way I take his arm and he steps me to the front of the car where no one coming from behind will see, and takes down my underwear and holds my hands while I bend my legs, and then you must lift your head from my bladder because I don't have to pee. But I try to press some out for Bluejay's sake. The rain feels cool. Blue Louisiana rain. I lift my face to Bluejay and pucker my lips, asking for a kiss. His mouth, for all his cigarettes, has a sweet taste of grapes.

Back inside the car I put the seat back one more time. This time I know I'll sleep. "Wake me up when we cross the Mississippi. I don't want to miss the river," I say, pulling my sweater out from between the seats.

I close my eyes, almost afraid of my sleep, the dreams that come, and I think I'm dreaming your dreams, the visions of the unborn, that we're dreaming together, that I can see into infinity. But sleep comes and when I wake the sun is well up. There's still a gray shine to it. Wetlands on either side of I-10, cypress and moss trees. Signs to Bayou Nezpique and Boeuf-Cocodrie Channel. Bluejay pulls in front of a truck and exits off I-10. The driver blares his horn.

"Hey, sleepy head," Bluejay chuckles. "You missed the Mississippi. I didn't want to wake you." I catch him admiring himself in the rear view, lifting his chin for a quick profile. "I got gas and picked up shrimp po'boys and slaw. We're going to picnic."

Fried food is the last thing someone on a crystal methedrine high desires, and right now it doesn't interest me either, but Bluejay is trying to be nice and I have to honor that. He turns onto a two lane that takes us into the oak trees hung with Spanish moss and fog; I'm whispering to you about their ringletted beards, how lovely they are, how they'd like to sweep away all the interstate and go back to the time of Evangeline. In 1971 every Louisiana student still had to memorize pieces of Longfellow's poem, and you probably will too. *Faint was the air with the odorous breath of magnolia blossoms.*

I crook my arm out the window. On both sides of the highway, foam simmers between cypress knees. Trees cluster behind trees and water leaves bubbles on their trunks. Everything is the pale green of asparagus. Ahead sits the bridge the sign says was built in 1894. Swamp creeps under the iron trestles as the Marquise clatters over its loose boards. Bluejay edges the hood of the car off onto the shoulder that is none too wide. My stomach could tip us into the bayou. He switches off the ignition and the engine quivers before it dies. Without the car's motion, Bluejay's face drains of color. His hand trembles, reaching for his shaving kit.

"Not again," I groan. "You've got an *ahnvee* for that meth."

Bluejay whips off his sunglasses and gives me a stare that turns into a glare. "I'm going to brush my teeth. Do you have a problem with that, lady?"

"I guess not." I wink at him. I'm going to make sure you learn that trick. A wink can get you forgiven in an instant. "Can I have my toothbrush too?"

Mine seems to be missing so we share his Roadrunner toothbrush, the bristles bent like weeds after high wind. We sit in the car and brush, gargling with warm Coke and spitting out the window. My mouth feels cleaner. Then Bluejay grabs a sack from in back and shoves his door open. "Let's find a place to eat."

We follow the road and then veer into the weeds. I hear the klee klee of a kingfisher flying, and then a formation of brown pelicans plunges from forty feet above into the water. Their long beaks frighten me. The closest one catches a mullet. I wrap my arms around my stomach. I'm trying to cover your eyes. When a pelican sees its prey, it dives headfirst. They have very keen sight. The pelican tips its bill to drain water, and the tail of the mullet shivers in a fan dance. I turn away before the bird tosses back its head and swallows the fish whole.

"How far do you want to go in, Bluejay?"

"I was thinking we'd find a nice dry stump with a water view."

When Bluejay wipes sweat from his chin, I notice two gnats clinging to his wrist. A *moustique*, mosquito, stings my left ear, and then my right. I can't lift my legs high enough and I wonder where your head is, against my navel or already facing down. Bluejay stamps ahead. My sneakers are soaked. I grab onto the back of his shirt, my neck feeling like a dandelion stem holding up my fat head.

"Having fun, honey?" he asks, stopping almost at the water's edge.

I point at a flatboat like a broken seagull melting into the mist. "This is pretty. It reminds me we're finally almost home," I say, trying to keep my voice upbeat, but the words get caught on my teeth.

"What do you mean by *finally* almost home? Criticizing me again, Dotty?"

"Bluejay, I have to sit."

"Sit then." Bluejay's eyes stay hard even when he smiles.

"Where? In this sloppy grass? If I do I won't be able to get up again." I understand he's coming down and cranky, but he's acting like a *yat*, an idiot.

He stiffens. "Eight months ago you would have loved this picnic."

"I'm wet up to my knees."

"Stand then. I'm ready to chow." He hands me a po'boy wrapped in a sheet of *Times-Picayune*. The sandwich is warm and gives off the odor of tartar sauce and newsprint. All at once I'm so hungry I claw away the paper. I don't want to eat beings that have to be killed first, but the French bread and the batter-fried shrimp in mayonnaise and shreds of lettuce are crazy irresistible. While I'm eating, the pelicans soar off, the tips of their wings flashing. I can smell their pouches. Bottom muck. My back aches and there's heaviness in my mind. I imagine the pelicans diving and scooping you and me up. Bluejay hasn't touched his sandwich. He shivers in the heat, his hands can't keep still.

"Let's go, beb," I say. "I don't like it here."

"I do." He unfolds the pack of Kools from his shirtsleeve, offers me one.

Somewhere close by a muskrat slaps the water with its tennis-paddle tail.

You deliver another punch to my pelvis, and then a kick. "I have to go back to the car." The sandwich is rising up my gullet. I cough, but there's nothing. "I'm going."

Bluejay blows out a long stream of smoke. To hell with him then. Today I don't want to play in the swamp, fighting off chiggers. I want to forget the ghosts of old Jean Lafitte and his buccaneers looting the alligators of their skins. I start into the slipperiness. When I glance back to see if Bluejay's coming, my foot turns and the waterweeds grab my sneaker. My balance is off. Out go my feet from under me. I try to catch myself. I throw out my arms, but it happens fast: I fall onto my stomach. Oh, no. I've hurt you, *le beau petit bébé*. I hear screams inside my head; my hands slip in the muck trying to push myself to my knees. My screams circle the cypresses, get lost in the feathery needles. "Bluejay, Bluejay!" Duckweed covers the water where I wade with my fingers. The muck wants to feed on me. Around me water skimmers breathe and spiders are hunting with their nets . . . *dragonniers*, dragonflies, make love in midair, mites cling to hosts, a crawfish eats its old shell before growing a new one. I'm being nudged into deeper water. I remember Mr. Chenier, my biology teacher, telling us that living systems live at the edge of chaos, that it is the richest phase. I roll onto my side, a toppled tree, a pandemonium of bacteria and cells. Bluejay is kneeling down, his eyes are frightened, especially the hazel one. I taste dead water and

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bugs.

“Here, take my hands,” he says, the cigarette in the corner of his lips quivering. “Let me help you, babe. You scared me.”

“This is your fault. You brought me here.” I spit mud. “Get away. *Chat.*”

“Put your arms around my neck. You slipped, babe. You got scared.”

“*Zeerah!* It’s the *bébé*, the real one. I fell on the baby.”

“You didn’t fall on your stomach. You caught yourself, and landed on your knees. I saw you, Dotty.”

“Don’t touch me. Coward.”

He hushes me, strokes my face, and tells me that I panicked, that I almost swooned, so he keeps rubbing my back and hushing me, everything’s fine, the baby’s okay. Bluejay lifts me to my feet, but even he has trouble keeping his balance in the muck. You’re quiet and not moving. I keep still and wait for you to kick. It’s too calm inside me, like a white ibis with its long slender beak in mist. No matter how long a person stares the bird doesn’t move. You feel shifted, like maybe you somersaulted to protect your head or thought it was time to come when the water inside churned and sprayed. Maybe you crossed your arms over your chest. Bluejay and I stumble back to the Marquise.

“Come on, Dotty, you’re shaking.” Bluejay opens the passenger’s door, reaching for a wet wipe from the glove box. “Hold still,” he tells me, cleaning his hands and then my face.

The engine turns over. I filch one of Bluejay’s Kools, and take quick hard draws without lighting it. My hand trembles. I’m still waiting for you to make a move, kick, punch, and hiccup. I keep taking quick hard draws, until I flick the cigarette out the window. Not a word passes between Bluejay and me. He clicks on the radio and the d-jay introduces “Les Flammes D’Enfer” (The Flames of Hell) with Austin Pitre on fiddle. I press my stomach searching for you. Do something to let me know you’re there. Maybe God can help. Mama raised me Catholic, but it’s been a long time since I believed anything a priest said.

“Should we pray, Bluejay?” I ask.

“To who, Dotty? My Jamaican mother believed God was a tree. A tree with animal bones under it, and birds if they roosted there would die. The tree cried like a sheep. But if you were strong enough to pluck a leaf from the tree, you would be a great healer. A doctor. You had to stab the tree again and again; you had to wound God to prove you were powerful. God was a tree that healed and killed people.”

“Dear God Tree,” I say, trying to see his mother’s tree. It’s somewhere in the swamp, no wind and yet its leaves shake, bleating. “Make my *bébé* kick me.”

*Donne-moi un petit bec doux.* Give me a sweet little kiss. And then you kick the right side of my stomach, thump the left. The noisy racket is back. Loud. My cheeks flush and I laugh outloud and clap. I could be watching white pelicans glide like swans when all at once their four-foot wings hit the water, slapping up cyclones, splashing. A grin spreads over my face. The Krewe of Zulu passes by tossing doubloons, men in sequins and gold lamé wave fans of flamingoes.

I squeeze Bluejay’s hand. “I think the baby’s alive.”

His face doesn’t change, but his eyes fill with water. I expect those tears to spill but they don’t. “I’m happy, Dotty.”

Airline Highway belongs to the bars, the party girls, the gambling. Sportsmen’s Paradise, crawfish and pool taverns, backhoes ripping out sidewalks, stopped, rusting. Jefferson Parish, stepsister to New Orleans. There’s some twisting jasmine and wisteria, but fewer moss trees and no big houses where cotton kings once partied. Here are shotguns and rooming houses where the river laborers and poor whites and blacks live. In New Orleans ghosts come out in the afternoons. Jefferson Parish ghosts walk at all

hours. We're on the stretch of rent-by-the-night-or-week motels. The Super Bowl Sunday, the Dixie Magnolia, the Sapphire Egret Inn, Sleep Easy.

I take a whiff of smoke, but I'm too pooped to bother asking if something else is busted or burning. Bluejay crows that the temperature gauge is in the red zone.

"The engine is burning oil," he says as a plume of smoke wafts from under the hood. Bluejay barely makes the turn into the Rainbow Motel. He switches off the engine and we coast. "You hard head. All of us in this Marquise, including the car, are *tête dure*."

The neon blinks VACANCY and the tin-roofed units could be chicken coops painted watermelon, turquoise, tangerine, and avocado. Bluejay reaches under the seat to touch his shaving kit, and then he runs a hand over his slacks. He steers the Marquise to the office's drive-up window, stops and taps the bulletproof glass. The dark-skinned woman sits on a stepladder in an orange nightgown. You know you're home when you see women spending all day, all week, all life in their nightgowns. I wait for her to speak to hear if she's a soft breeze from the Island, or if she has the drawl or this peculiar Cajun way, but she doesn't talk at all. The orange nightgown parts over her knee. The sign in the window reads twenty dollars a night, one hundred by the week.

The drawer slides out and he turns to me. "Let me have a hundred."

"I don't want to stay here a week," I complain. After buying the car we have seven hundred dollars left from yard work and it's for first and last month's rent. "That's throwing money away."

"You'd rather throw the thousand bucks this car cost away? If I drive it another mile it's finished."

I reach into my tie-dye shoulder bag for his wallet. He doesn't like keeping it on his person because of his pickpocket past. A pickpocket greases his hands with Crisco oil to make sure his touch is soft. Another wisp of smoke rises from the hood of the car.

I give the folded bill over to Bluejay. "We better put the fire out."

"No kidding." He drops the money into the drawer that shuts and pulls itself back into the office.

The woman has our hundred dollars before she sends the drawer back with a ballpoint pen and a registration card. Bluejay tries to hide the card from me but I wiggle over his shoulder. "Who is Bino Greene?"

He grits his teeth. "Could you talk any louder?" He glances at the woman, and then lowers his voice. "Bluejay Guy never stayed in a dump like this."

The registration card goes into the drawer and out comes the room key hooked to a wire hanger.

"If you're N'awlins bound your car won't get you there," the woman says, in that cut up, harsh way of the Cajun. "Put the bonfire out before you park."

Bluejay pops the Mercury's hood and a cloud of oily smoke escapes. He switches off the ignition, grabs the liter of Coke and lunges to the front of the car dousing the engine with carbonated beverage. More dirty clouds.

We freewheel to the orange cabin with the number 7 upside down on the door. Bluejay hands me the key. I waddle inside. What an odor. A muffuletta sandwich—salami meats and mozzarella between two slices of mildewed carpet and dressed with dirty underwear. In the mirror I find Dotty with lips that a paintbrush might have swirled under her nose, and hair torn by the wind. The maternity blouse sticks to the bulging avocado of my stomach. My breasts are huge, only my legs still mine. Bangs reach to the middle of my nose, hiding my blue-gray eyes. Once Bluejay told me they reminded him of overcast skies about to rain.

Your daddy throws our suitcase on the bed. He bitches about my layer of books on top of the threads. *Louisiana Wading Birds. Flora and Fauna of the Atchafalaya*. If I don't read at least ten pages a day I get a headache. I hope you'll be a reader too. As a kid my mama never learned to read or write, instead she helped her father on his shrimp boat. Once she fell off the riggings into the Gulf of Mexico, and the crew didn't realize she was missing and the boat chugged off. She spent twelve hours in the water, back

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floating. In the middle of the night a big fish started knocking into her wondering what she was, and she hauled off and hit it, and then breaststroked the rest of the way in. Growing up I had to read out everything from bills to Bisquick recipes for her.

“Well?” Bluejay says. I expect him to stretch out, to at least take the pillow into his arms and move one under his head. But he goes to the phone, picks up the receiver, and then sets it back in its cradle. “I have to go find a pay phone to call Valentino.”

My lower lip quivers. “Why don’t you use that phone?” I ask.

“I don’t want that office lady listening in,” he murmurs like her ear is already pressed to the wall. And then he laughs to let me know he’s joking. “That phone is for damn show. It doesn’t have a dial tone.” He cracks the door and a shaft of sunlight strikes the marsh-rat carpet.

I don’t like this room and the bathroom I like worse. There’s a half step down, and then a foot or so of linoleum floor. Shaving cream crusts to the mirror. I’m not alone. A *moustique* rubs its feelers, explores the bar of Cashmere Bouquet. The shower is a nozzle screwed into the wall and a drain. I sit on the toilet and use my toes to pull down my stretch pants. My back aches like crazy. My legs are shaking; I trace the lines running between the tiles. I pee and then something drips out of me, hits the water too softly to be urine. I start to cry even before I look. Blood. I wipe and now the toilet paper bleeds too. The key turns in the lock and Bluejay calls out that he’s back.

“Bluejay, I’m bleeding. I don’t think I should be doing that.”

He’s sitting on the room’s one chair. Like a kitchen chair ran away from its table and hid out here. His eyes go to the trickle on my thigh. Hot bobbie pins of sun are pricking up the carpet.

“Is that the blood you’re talking about?”

I nod. “Maybe we should go to Charity Hospital.”

“It doesn’t look like much.” He musses my hair. “Do you want to make us wait in those hard chairs with all the coughing sick people?”

There he goes with his questions again. I picture the golden orb weaver spinning its intricate web. The pretty white, yellow and black spider waiting for the struggling fly to die. Those hard chairs in Charity’s Emergency Room waiting area are really sticky webs. Anyway, the blood trickle didn’t make it past my knee. Bluejay’s probably right. “Will you help me shower?” I ask.

“Sure, but maybe I should go first. I’ve got errands to run. Valentino’s going to come by and take me around to the auto supply houses. We need a new fuel pump and thermostat.”

“But I don’t want to be alone. It smells so bad here.”

“Wouldn’t you like the car fixed so I can carry you to the hospital when the baby comes? Do you want all the auto supplies to be closed? I’m burning daylight.”

Bluejay always asks questions when he wants to wiggle out of something. He throws a sad glance at me, his brown eye more sorrowful than the hazel one. They look like gator holes. And he follows that with a mournful smile. Then he strokes my arms and lets me feel the calluses on his palms and remember all that digging he did.

There’s a cramp in my middle and I have to hold onto the doorframe.

“Come on, darling, you’re clean enough,” he says, “I’m making you lie down.”

“Bluejay, I want my mama.”

“Be a big girl.” He purses his lips. “Sssshhhh.” His fingers pick the mud from my buttons, peel the blouse from my skin. After wringing out a washcloth, he runs it over my face. “Good enough.” He pulls back the spread, plumps the pillow. On the bed I’m a gopher tortoise rolled over onto its shell, a wood stork with its legs off. Bluejay lifts my feet and puts his pillow under them. He fills a plastic glass with water and sets it on the night table. I still want my mama, and wonder if Bluejay told the truth about the phone. She’ll be Mawmaw to you. Fun like a *lagniappe*, that something extra you don’t have to pay for. Back when I was a girl she changed her hair from month to month, teased it like Marie Antoinette,



ironed it flat like Cleopatra. As soon as I learned how to print she had me order that lingerie of spider webs from the back of *Photoplay*. These days she's fat with diabetes but still makes the best Coca Cola cake.

I'm glad Bluejay doesn't close the bathroom door. While he showers I imagine rain. Drizzle makes me sleepy. I make myself relax.

"Feeling better?" he asks, standing over me, his hair wet-combed. He's put on fresh jeans and a shirt unbuttoned one button too many. He holds his gold loafers. Valentino's hand-me-downs. And the cologne he splashes on has cinnamon and nutmeg in it. Bluejay laughs, his Adam's apple bobs up and down. The lively breezes are flowing again in him. He must have done more crystal.

"You're dressing to see that old Maf like you're going to a woman."

Outside a horn beeps twice. Bluejay kisses my forehead and then hurries out. A car door opens and before it slams, a Zydeco tune spills out. "Take me to the Mountain Top." I roll to the edge of the bed, hold onto the nightstand and make myself sit. You're with me and I'm glad. Otherwise I'd be all by myself. I feel a burst of energy and better use it to get clean. I waddle into the bathroom.

It's pretty watching water while I shower. I close my eyes, relax and rest, take a deep breath. I'm snuggling against my own mama in the boarding house, letting the blueness run over me like a summer downpour. Then my insides gurgle. Heartburn races from my gut into my mouth. An ache settles into my tailbone. Bluejay should be here. I'm nauseous and start to cough. I almost don't make it to the sink before throwing up tartar sauce and shrimp. I twist on the hot water. I need air and try to slide the bathroom's window up. It's nailed. Like the swamp in here, pale gnats are lighting on the toilet seat, and in the wallpaper those squiggles are really trees, one behind the other until you could lose your own breath. I feel a pop between my legs. A straw-colored liquid spills down my leg. I panic, grabbing onto the counter. The trickle stops.

I try the phone, but Bluejay told the truth. No dial tone. I turn on TV. The midday movie host announces that it's August 4th and the anniversary of Marilyn Monroe's accidental suicide. In her honor this replay of *Some Like it Hot*. I'm happy. I love Marilyn. She hasn't died because here she is with her blurred face like gauze, and she doesn't talk, just exhales and inhales her tiny words at you along with her silky body, and her breasts flaming Potoo and Patoo in black sequins so many they blink and bat their sparkle at the camera, but all the while look nailed to her flesh. Her hips wiggle. Her body reminds me of the most expensive entrée, she-crab and endive salmon boat, her lips are flame-seared fantasy shrimp. She's the gloss on the table draped with linen thick as diapers for the mess grown men can make. The mole on her chin is an hors d'oeuvre to be nibbled with a Neptune's fork.

I try to ignore the cramp that starts in my spine, moving in a wave to the front. There's Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in flapper dresses and hats; they're playing in an all-girls jazz band. I slump at the edge of the bed, smiling as their high heels bend and they sway like they're holding potato chips between their thighs. Marilyn is behind the microphone singing "I Wanna be Loved by You," her gown iridescent like a dragonfly's wings, her nipples sheltered by a starburst of sequins. The spotlight haloes her. Her *dee-do-wop* feels next to my ear.

The cramp won't go away. I press my stomach, trying to massage the water-snake pain away, but it tightens. One, two, three, four, five. I'm supposed to count. Six, seven, eight, nine. I'm not sure why because you're safe inside me. I keep counting until the cramp swims away. Another spasm, and this one makes me afraid. My teeth chatter, I taste blood from where I bit my lip. Another explosion. I'd better tell the woman in the bulletproof glass to call an ambulance. I'll go to Charity Hospital. The wave subsides. Better yet I'll get dressed, find a pay phone, and call a taxi. I don't need anyone's help.

I reach for my shoulder bag on the floor next to the nightstand. Faraway like it dropped below the water table. Bluejay's wallet is inside, but the seven one hundred dollar bills aren't. I search for my own money, the fifties I stashed in my corn-seed coin purse. Gone. But the twenty, at least that's still fold-

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ed into my compact. Bluejay's trying to double our money, that's why he took it; he wants the best for you, his mermaid, his marsh baby.

On TV Tony Curtis isn't a flapper anymore, he's a Shell Oil millionaire on a white beach next to a hotel with cupolas, about to board a yacht with sails that look like wedding cake. He's falling in love with Marilyn whose name is Sugar Kane. I rest my hand on the screen.

Another contraction. The cramp has a corkscrew shape. I lower myself onto the bed. I'm bleeding a white-pink mucous. I roll onto my left side, pulling my knees up. When I talk to you I don't feel my voice reaching your ears. It's not time for you to be born, you won't have enough flesh to keep warm, and you have to stay where you are. I have your name picked. Brigitte. But it isn't time for you yet. When the cramp comes I pull the sheet and grab a corner, bury my face in it. I groan and grunt. I twist my head. One, two, three, four. Count again the seconds between spasms.

Then I feel something warm on my cheek. "Sweetie, get on your hands and knees," Marilyn breathes. "Lying on your back is the worse position to have a baby in. I know all about babies. *Boop-boop-be-doop.*"

I try to focus. Marilyn and Tony lie together on a long leather couch, his shoe rising up and down behind her. "I've got a funny sensation in my toes—like someone is barbecuing them over a slow flame," he says. I do my best to laugh when Marilyn quips, "Let's put another log on."

I'm hardly over the last cramp when another one starts; I hear grunting coming out of my mouth. I throw my forearm over my eyes.

"You're going to have to really push, kiddo. *Boop-boop.* Those cramps are getting really nasty. Better get a warm bath towel ready. The baby needs to get out."

I see Marilyn in my mind's eye singing. "*I got a fever. An inflammation.*" She's in a different dress. A black feathery concoction. "Poor birds, Hollywood steals their feathers for our gowns. The plume hunters shoot them during nesting and leave their chicks to die," Marilyn coos, her voice sounding like two feathers rubbing together. "Come on, Dotty, one, two, three . . . PUSH. One, two, three . . . PUSH. Oh, did you get that warm towel? And didn't I tell you to get down on all fours?"

"Marilyn, please keep singing."

"I will if you get onto the floor." Her voice is comforting but firm. "*You turn the heat on me. Some like it hot.*"

By the time I get off the bed and onto the floor every pore on my body is perspiring. The ceiling seems right above me like I'm in a crawl space. Now what? I'm being cleaved into halves. I grit my teeth, bite the corner of the sheet. Maybe this ripping is why I can't talk to you anymore. This is where you leave me.

Marilyn is close by. I smell her perspiring too. She's managed to change her clothes into a sparkly netted gown. "I'm pregnant myself. That's why I'm so puffy with flower blossoms covering my unmentionables."

The baby is moving down into the birth canal. I keep opening and opening until I float out of myself into the swamp. Here the gar my father used to fish for drift, long fishes with armor of scales. Gars float near my feet. They are biting me in half, sinking their needle teeth in. Marilyn wiggles slowly over to me, shooing them away. "Oh, the garfish aren't nice. They're like movie producers. They let toads collect on their back, then dive and eat them." She pats my head, giggling. "Gar make bad mothers. A few more contractions, kiddo. We'll get your baby birthed." Her face goes serious and her eyes open wide. "After gar deposit their eggs, they desert them. I'm worse than that. My eggs are poisonous. Twelve abortions, kiddo. What did you do wrong to get me for your midwife?"

There's an earthquake inside me. I scream, "STOP. STOP. I CAN'T."

"PUSH, KEEP PUSHING. Gravity is your helper. They can sew you up. I'm stitched and look, you wouldn't know my insides are a stinky nest. PUSH."

Blood spreads over the floor. I'm shaking and hiccupping. My feet are cold.

"Kiddo, push," Marilyn whispers, "the head is coming, the shoulders. Catch her, catch her. Anyway, the credits are about to roll. I have to be on time for them." She blows me a kiss. "Tootles. Oh, yeah, and wait for the placenta before cutting the cord. Don't treat it like something dirty."

I reach down and grope for your head, making sure there's no cord around your neck. I'm having chills, dry mouth, and cracked lips.

The sky is the clearest blue I've ever seen and there are birds everywhere. Huge mango hummingbirds with green torsos flit. Tiny hummingbirds I mistake for bees. The little birds beat their wings so hard. I keep getting colder as I clean you. Shivering so badly I bite my lip. I roll onto my back and lift the pink-red jelly with pointed head to my breast; you're so tiny and scrunched, your arms and legs bent as if you are still in my womb. A girl. But I already knew that. There are tiny white spots on your chest, a cleft between your legs, five toes on each foot. Your skin wrinkles and a fine hair covers it. I pull the sheet around us, rub your back. Your first cry. Your fingernails are long and like tissue paper. Your eyes are open, and green like swamp. And—I don't know where it's coming from—there's blood under us. I reach for my sneaker, pull the shoelace free with my teeth, hold you in one arm, and get up on my elbow. You're perfect even if you are tiny. I tie the shoelace around the umbilical cord. I can't wait for your granny mawmaw to meet you. But now I'm confused, I'm not sure what to do. You haven't started to suck; your lips don't take hold. The key turns in the door. I let out a long breath, "Bluejay?" I struggle to half sit against the side of the bed. My legs rest in shimmering pools of red water.

"Yeah, it's me."

Get ready to meet your daddy. He'll probably want you to call him Bluejay. He should be a hand model; I could watch him forever demonstrate how to fold a cuff into a shirtsleeve or jingle a set of car keys. His fingers are music, better than hands, better than what everyone else carries on the ends of their wrists. His favorite foods are Fritos and Tabasco sauce, Tootsie Rolls and salt.

The door opens and there's a light brighter than the sun. Bluejay stands like he is twenty feet tall. He hasn't yet seen his brand new daughter.

"Dotty?" He crouches, and the room goes so still. Then he gets down in the red lake with me. I'm filled with birds and flowers. Your daddy is going to take us to Jamaica for a vacation, maybe when you're four or five. Two hundred species of birds live there. The doctor bird is really the streamertail hummingbird, the old woman bird is the lizard-cuckoo, there's the rain bird, the chestnut-bellied cuckoo, and the blue mountain duck. There's the jamicrow. They all fly in a blue wind.

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