

A Memory of Fictions

(or)

Just Titty-Boom

By

LEONCE GAITER

LEGBA BOOKS

A Memory of Fictions

(or)

Just Tiddy-Boom

Published by Legba Books

Copyright © 2024 by Leonce Gaiter

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval without permission in writing from the author.

ISBN: 979-8-9902899-0-1

www.LeonceGaiter.com

Printed in U.S.A.

“LOST IN THE STARS”

Words by Maxwell Anderson

Music by Kurt Weill

TRO © Copyright 1944 (Renewed) 1946 (Renewed)

Hampshire House Publishing Corp., New York, NY
and Chappell & Co., Los Angeles, CA

International Copyright Secured Made in U.S.A.

All Rights Reserved

Used by Permission

“One school reasons that the present is undefined, that the future has no other reality than as present hope, that the past is no more than present memory. Another school declares that the whole of time has already happened and that our life is a vague memory or dim reflection, doubtless false and fragmented, of an irrevocable process.”

— Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlon, Uqbar, Orbis, Tertius”

Chapter I

WHITE TRASH STOLE MY WHEEL

Los Angeles, 1986

Jessie woke to a tinny radio alarm screaming the morning news. He rose from the folding futon he had spread the night before, this in his one-room, ground-floor barrio apartment that despite extraordinary efforts still smelled of previous tenants' cigarettes, feet, and beer. Paint peeled off the walls—walls behind which innumerable generations of roaches had made their homes. On closer inspection, (and he inspected closely once he had sprayed with poisons to the point of his own asphyxiation), they had appendages no insect should. Mutants, probably. With his luck, probably a plague-carrying strain.

The next moment, mariachi music blasted through the window. The whole building shook to the beat of the oom-pah bass. A maudlin voice through accordion chords wailed about his *corazón*. He could have ripped the *corazón* from whoever was blaring that car radio at 7:30 am. He flashed on an image of himself striding outside in his shorts, thrusting his hand through the open car window, deep into that chest, and wrenching forth the heart—the shocked, bewildered faces of the neighbors wailing wildly in abject horror, blabbering

madly in Spanish, crossing themselves furiously and convinced they had glimpsed the devil itself.

He steamed impotently until the car drove off, the thunderous bass trailing after it. In the sudden silence, he opened the window to let some air in.

“Putá!” WHAP! Through window he heard the palm smack her face and the wounded woman’s cry. Looking out, Jessie saw the man turn and walk away, as she followed, her eyes red and tearing, both hands to the burning cheek.

He closed the window.

In the tiny hallway between the bathroom and the front door, he opened his small closet for the artful task of dressing. He chose the underpants with the fewest holes; ditto the socks. On the ground sat three old, well-worn pairs of shoes. Today, he chose the black topsiders, the soles of which were split, but such that no one could tell unless he crossed his legs in the masculine fashion—not likely. The clothes were mildly tattered but clean, well-matched, and tasteful. Since they hailed from his better days, their wornness could pass for chic dishevelment.

Once dressed, he loaded his slim wallet in his back pocket, took enough change to board the bus, with transfer, and headed for work.

Such were the depths to which Jessie Vincent Grandier III had sunk.

He had not been a fall down, gutter drunk, or one that wept on barstools at the mention of “mother”

or “friendship.” In public, he drank moderately and behaved well. It was in private, behind locked doors, that he punished himself like a vicious child who had trapped some writhing creature. He had never foreseen such a fall, had not been raised to think events so chipped-flint sharp could cut him, so bright and loud could blind and deafen him. His senses had been tuned to the American lie of ease and subtler things. Dulcet tones. Muted hues.

After graduating from Harvard, he had barely set foot in his father’s house in the DC suburbs before he fled to Los Angeles where he soon took his first TV job—in the mailroom. He had never been west of the Mississippi and rarely far from the academic underbellies of New York and Boston. He had come to make his mark in film, to wring through great art a deliverance from the strange, vaudevillian, death-besotted saga of his life. He had studied film under pot-bellied semioticians and weasly philosophy PhD’s, men who spoke of films in terms of sacred texts—a language in which Jessie had grown proudly fluent and knew—just knew—to be the standard lexicon of all film folk.

As with so much in his young life, the joke would be on him.

On hearing of his plans to move to Los Angeles, Jessie’s father suggested he live with one of his two

LA relations, Cousins Alma or Fred, but preferred he live with Alma, for she, as he put it, lived “right in the middle of everything” while Fred lived, “way the hell out there” in Beverly Hills.

Alma lived in the ghetto.

Jessie’s plane hit LA at night. He sat in Alma’s car on the ride from the airport leering out the windows at the moonlit noir-ness, the palm trees, the stucco, the gaudy, freeway-ribboned, incandescent sprawl. It was so much like he had pictured it. Gazing out those windows, Jessie imagined himself cinematically larger than life: on the lam, running, perhaps scared, definitely lethal.

The next day, he faced with shock the sun-blanchered reality of the world beyond the Ivy—league, that is.

Jessie was not accustomed to poor people, nor black folks who did not conform to the New Orleans/Creole college-educated striver mold. As an Army child, he had lived many places, at home and abroad, in most of them surrounded by white people. His mother avoided his father’s family like the plague, and her people, among whom the children sometimes lived, came from Africans who, generations ago, interbred with the visiting Spanish and French such that skin honeyed, hair loosened, features remolded. Although black, individually and culturally they crowned themselves unique. Often monied, the cream of New Orleans’ black coffee, the most outrageous of them, the ones from whom Jessie had sprung, bore themselves with a mixture of semi-courtly majesty and gutbucket

sass that Jessie had come to think of as the universal black folk norm (just as he thought Hollywood filled to spillage with semioticians).

To open the door that morning, walk outside, hit main drag Crenshaw Boulevard, and hear consonant clusters drop like pennies and the non-ironic use of “ain’t” . . . to be welcomed to the neighborhood by a young woman sporting a nametag reading, “Aquanetta,” her striped uniform dotted with orange game birds identifying her as off-to-work preparing greasy chicken dishes . . . this shocked him. It would have been one thing if he could have dismissed them, like he would have hillbillies. But with them he shared a common ancestry. How, oh how, could similar cultural underpinnings have produced someone called “Aquanetta” and himself?

Jessie’s cousin Fred, Alma’s brother (and arch enemy because he was rich and lived in Beverly Hills and she wasn’t and didn’t) still worked the original fount of his current wealth, a veterinary office on the corner of a once middle-class black neighborhood, now gone to seed. His naugahyde lobby, unchanged since the ‘60s, smelled faintly of dog and if you traveled through the double doors, the smell overwhelmed you as you reached the tiny back apartment in which Jessie’s Uncle Bernard lived. He was about seventy, and one of those old men who seemed outrageously fat, though he was not huge. The fat had just invaded every crack and crevice in him. His fingertips, his ankles, his knees. Some was swelling. Bernard drank, too.

Bernard drank like a blaring object lesson. He gave the impression he had really worked and yearned for something years ago, but you couldn't figure what. You couldn't separate the bluster, the bravado and lies, from the truth, but occasionally, something set him alight, and the heightened lucidity bespoke honesty. During Jessie's slow, relentless fall, the January 1943 Carnegie Hall Concert recording of the historic performance of Duke Ellington's uncut "Black Brown and Beige" was released on vinyl. Jessie couldn't afford it, but he bought it anyway. Now, guilty, he visited Bernard to borrow money. Sixty dollars. Not much. He wanted and needed more but wouldn't get it since poor Bernard was the only one from whom he wasn't too embarrassed to borrow. At the veterinary office, they sent him to a bar down the street called the Ten Spot.

Fifties style red-shaded lamps hung down above the tables—cool lighting, dim but not sleazy, reeking of jukebox Dinah Washington and troubles you tell no one. Semi-circular booths, the kind in which, drink in hand, you forge friendships through raucous laughter, the point of which you may forget, but the memory of which you keep forever. The faces leaned over the bar, full of lines and forgetting, and all of this looked like it might have looked years and years ago. Jessie had dreamt places like this. He dreamt himself in them, full of his own imaginary black people, the ones he loved, who, unlike the white ones, accepted their dying, sometimes piss poorly but they accepted it, who ate bitterness and want, who digested it and made it

part of themselves, knew rage, against white men and God, and could still wake each day and do what they had to, who didn't confuse themselves with God, and, sick with power, make everything in heaven and earth smaller than they were, and then, contemptuous, kill or demean it.

Bernard sat there, alone at a booth. The afternoon sun streamed in through the stained glass windows, shifting the deep reds of the place to burnished orange, and his face merged with the sun and woods and red-globed lanterns, with the emptiness and the slow song, the voice tired, resigned, and almost amused, that played on the box. His eyes were too large, bloodshot, and his hair speckled with a dirtying gray. His brown skin was still smooth, though, the damage he inflicted showing mainly in airs, and girth, and in the worn, tired eyes.

"Wish I could do moh fo' ya'," he said in a voice weak from liquor and cigarettes, not even gravelly, or raspy or any of those things that might have lent it distinction. "But I'm not one o' the money folks. I'm poh folk." He laughed, tongue inching through the lips, a tortured sound like an asthmatic urgently blowing a balloon. They talked of the music for a while, Jessie mentioning the Ellington album. He couldn't confess to buying it, not while he sat here bumming sixty bucks for food to eat.

"I knew her back in the ole days," Bernard said when Jessie mentioned the girl singer, Betty Roche. "Back in Nyarlens." He said he jammed with her and other

famous names, way back when. He talked of others he knew, musicians, most of them dead now, a few familiar names, but most players no one remembered except others like himself who heard them and knew their worth firsthand.

Jessie tried to imagine this old man young. Staring at that face he tried to whittle away the years from the eyes, whittle away the fat and the wear and tear to find a seed that could stand for the younger man. Since he could not, he rested on cliché: dark places like this one full of smart mouthed women in butt-tight cocktail dresses, the smell of hair tonic about them, tottering on heels after a few too many, their conked escorts full of swagger and bullshit. Colored folks, all of whom knew what a saxophone meant, and what Mahalia Jackson sounded like. His head said there was nothing to envy. Each generation, armed with the ray guns of romance, envies its predecessors. There was nothing in it. No truth to the rumor that black folks had lived on the other sides of mountains.

*

Having dressed in his worn best, Jessie crept from his barrio apartment, the socialist snoring mightily behind the bedroom door. He paced contentedly to the busstop that morning. It was lovely out, yesterday's rain having cleared the smog away. Even this dirty

neighborhood looked welcoming. Across the street, tenement dwellers loaded their piecework from their sewing machine-filled apartments into a van. Mildly to severely overweight women dragged children to schools and busstops, little child voices like razors. Yuppies in Volvos and near-yuppies in Jeeps swept down this two-lane street, shortcutting to their jobs downtown, the towers of which were visible between the ramshackle apartment buildings. As he stood at the crosswalk, a streetsweeper roared past outpacing many a passenger car, occasionally swiping the piles of fast food wrappers, beer cans and Old Night Train bottles amassed in the gutters. The driver actually blared his horn at the slower cars in his path.

Jessie wondered if that dead thing was still there, the decomposition of which now fascinated him. It had shocked him at first. He'd assumed it was a cat. Then on closer inspection, he realized it was some wild thing, a possum maybe. That first day, he passed it with a subdued "eeuugghhh" and walked on. He assumed that some government bureau in charge of dead things would discard the corpse. He had forgotten where he was, a denizen of just *where* he had become. For the next two weeks that same rotting possum lay festering, a feast for ants and roaches, probably local cats and dogs accustomed to meals of rotting flesh. As the days passed, it began to look as if it had deflated. As if the life, along with the flesh, had just been . . . let out. There was something wrong when his world and that of wild, rotting creatures were not distinct. Some

breaking point had been reached. Accommodation would have to be made.

On arriving at the bus stop, he stood with his nose pressed against the nearest wall, as if suddenly overwhelmed with grief or examining it for structural faults. This prevented positive identification by passing motorists. How humiliating to take the bus in LA. It meant carlessness, and in a town where fry cooks with shoes still damp from crossing the Rio Grande drove, carlessness bespoke a demeaning sort of poverty, the kind where you couldn't even scare up a few hundred for a passable wreck, and hadn't the resources, connections, or cool to turn over some quick drugs for the money.

The downslide, the slow, inexorable decline of Jessie Grandier had begun with the car, as so much does in LA. A few months out of St. Mary's Drug Rehabilitation Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, he still lived in fashionable Beverly Hills Adjacent although he had been laid off from the low-level network TV executive job to which he had quickly climbed. Jessie owed two months' rent.

That building sat just off the Sunset Strip, an historic main drag dotted with rock 'n' roll clubs. The clubs sat nearly dark through the late '70s and early '80s, but now experiencing a renaissance through Heavy Metal. Skinny boys in skin-tight leather pants, long blond hair layered and dyed, studded bracelets about the wrists, and their girls in hooker/whore drag, tight mini-skirts and fishnets, tits bouncing (if they had them yet), and

tripping in spike heels over any wound in the pavement. At closing time they spewed from the clubs, drunk and stumbling, yelling, fighting, fucking.

One presentimental night, Jessie came home to find a strange car jacked-up near his parking space. A gaunt, scruffy looking man, and a fat, dyed-blond woman in skin-tight clothes and too much makeup hung out of the open doors of their tattered VW. Cigarettes dangled from their lips. He eyed them suspiciously. He went straight to his balcony to spy on them, but from that angle, he couldn't see anything. He should have confronted them, threatened them, called the police, done something. But he didn't. Cops unnerved him. He had a kitchen drawer full of unpaid bills. He had mistakenly opened it the previous week and immediately slammed it shut with a shudder. The registration had expired and the car was not insured. He waited. Eventually he fell asleep.

Next morning he found his little dented orange Datsun listing badly to one side. A wheel was gone. Not just flat, but gone. He could have screamed. In fact he did. A loud, low growl of woeful insult, for he knew this was the beginning of the end, the first stomach churning lurch on a long, steep, downhill plunge the end of which was nowhere near and the depths of which he couldn't imagine.

"White trash!" he spat, the outrage and portentousness palpable . . . "*White trash* stole my wheel!"

DATELINE LOS ANGELES—1988

An unquestionably ignorant, possibly senile ex-actor, having assumed the Presidency of the United States through ingeniously manipulating romantic iconography, outdated yet still potent, of great frontier boom lands begging settlement by lean and hearty white folks, in fact served as shield for corporate interests and wealthy individuals, reducing or eliminating restrictions on their financial behavior.

The country embarked on an unprecedented peacetime military buildup, with a reciprocal dwindling of non-military resources. Thus, many fell homeless, funds for safety-net programs for mental health and public housing slashed, they begged coins, dirty, sometimes dangerous, sleeping in paper on doorsteps, squatting in abandoned buildings, defecating on sidewalks, standing near freeways holding signs saying “will work for food.” The number of Americans without health insurance rose dramatically, as did the cost of medical care. Hospitals turned away those without coverage. The infant mortality rate rose to the highest in the industrialized world. Funds for

education dwindled across the fifty states. Inner cities, populated by blacks, Latinos, and other minorities were the hardest hit, commerce having abandoned their neighborhoods. The manufacturing base of the U.S. disappeared through government policies aligned with corporate greed to drive manufacturing to cheap third world labor sources to which U.S. corporations flocked. The inner city high school dropout rates shot to near fifty percent. Youth gang violence exploded and random drive-by shootings became a way of life.

It was America. You got by, that's all. You did what you had to, prayed for a windfall, bought that lottery ticket, hoped and prayed another chance might find you.

You got by.

Chapter II

GOD'S TROMBONES

When some billionaire succumbed to financial fashion and bought the TV network for which Jessie worked, layoff rumors flew. Soon, efficiency experts roamed the halls in gray suits and barbershop hairdos, sparking nervous whispers. Jessie and the other script readers in the Story Department thought themselves safe. How could a TV drama department survive without its editorial component? Someone had to read and “fix” the script of any proposed TV pilot. Plus, informal discussions with higher ups assured them, “You’re fine.” After the news . . . “We’re sorry, but we’ll be restructuring and . . .” He and his colleagues walked away from between five and fifteen years of their lives, not that surprised, but each feeling low, and ill-used.

“Just as well,” Jessie thought, in a rare trip to the bright side, “something to get me off my ass and pointed in the right direction.”

And he knew what that was. He had studied; he had mastered. Now he would *do*. He had known as far back as he remembered. In college, the specifics changed. Writing to film. That’s all. There was still time.

He could still assume his birthright. He would wear that barbed wire mantle that hung in the back of his own mental closet like the family's long-lost crown. He would grin while the spikes drew his blood.

He had long detested self-aggrandizing portraits of young *Artistes*, sensitive, soulful wimps who got tripped up in school hallways and pined after big-breasted girls who didn't know their names. He resented their announcements that they walked the path to greatness. Some things should be secrets. To declare oneself, to tell them all, that was treason. It was as if he carried a cipher inside himself, which God had whispered, (Do you hear me!? GOD. No one less) in strictest confidence. That he would make beauty from nothing. That he would be more than a mere man.

He told no one. He feared such thoughts. How many foolishly believed they bore such predestined weight? If his notions were true, well then, he surely must be blessed, as few have been. He would know, perhaps on his deathbed, that that had been the case.

If they proved false . . . well, then, he cursed himself and his past, those god-damned liars, those vicious whisperers, for doing their job so well because he knew that these notions would not fade, no matter how he tried to best them. They would not fade. Not while he drew breath.

Double-cursed he was. Not born fool enough to let his own lies be. Laden with missives from God that might be fake.

She had already borne Janice and Talia, but his

father needed a boy. His father, the youngest of thirteen children, among them many males, not one having borne a son. The odds against this seemed extraordinary, clearly the work of impish, giggling gods. Jessie's father would thwart them, though, and produce an heir to the legacy of the Grandiers—a couple of acres of bayou swamp land and an uninhabitable hut—all prized by his family as if the last remnants of an empire.

Lulene embarked on a third pregnancy, despite doctors' warnings. They wanted to give her a hysterectomy after the second, but she refused. She had too much to gain by trying once more, by possessing what her husband so needed. She risked a lot, her life, at the hands of military doctors, Grandier (she always called him that—just "Grandier") being in the Army. Butchers with stethoscopes the lot. The black ones had an excuse, she thought. They joined up for medical degrees, the only way they could get them. But the white ones . . .

She had two girls they struggled to support. Janice, almost six by now, already covered her ears at night so not to hear the screams and beatings, blocking out words like "money" and "liquor" and "women," already accepting the role of strong and impervious child who soothed and solaced the mother. Talia had already conceived her self-involved cocoon, building it clandestinely, on the childish sly, like nighttime masturbation, thread by stolen thread, in which she would soon live unchallenged, and later emerge, she knew, even more beautiful. It was not right to bring

another one into this for spite. Oh, but she would love him all the more for it. Even now she loved him all the more. “Him,” she thought, because she knew. She took him to her bed, and there they stayed for months until his birth.

Creole women did things. Jessie once thought them cruel, but these women were more overt, less . . . sentimental, that’s all. They never relinquished the winning cards from down their fronts. They always kept one bullet in the barrel. Her husband wanted a son like a junky the needle. She saw to it that there would be one forever just beyond his reach.

Lulene bore him, and her family of women set about anointing him. For them, Lulene did him up like a little Dauphin. Shorts suits, bow ties, white socks, and a pressed white shirt, wavy black hair slicked down and to the side. He’d take her hand, waist high to her, waist high to everyone, wide-eyed, shy, always proper, speaking when spoken to and speaking well, always aware that he was *of* her, an extension, looking like her, as if she had opened her mouth unnaturally wide and forced him out in some perversion of birth then cleaned up the spit and blood so no one would know what she’d done.

In a yacht-sized white Mercury with green trim around the fins, they traveled for what seemed like hours. They hit the edge of town, where train tracks met abandoned lots overgrown with huge thistly bushes. Trees clutched high white fences as if frightened. The sun beat down harder here—he had to squint to see—

and the clouds hung lower, as if you could reach up and pull them down to play with. Silent in the car, he fidgeted and squirmed. He counted to himself the churches they passed. He studied her face. He tried to see her eyes behind her dark glasses. He tried to read the expression on the expressionless lips, so wet and lush they might have dripped huge dollops of their red.

Ethel's compound stood behind a wall of trees and bushes. The car pulled up outside and sent a dust cloud floating up. Lulene climbed out, some near oriental-looking high-necked dress, silken black hair. Her copper colored skin seemed to change hue with every move as if playing its own gleeful game of tag with the sun. Jessie scrambled hurriedly from the car, crawling halfway across the expansive front seat to leap the chasm between the baseboard and the ground, knowing that for her every step he needed two to keep up. He grabbed her skirt and followed.

Aunt (pronounced "Ont" not "Ant," thank you) Ethel, Miss Honey, Missy. They were old by the time Jessie knew them, but age hadn't dulled them. Lulene's Aunt Ethel piled the pancake on pretty heavy, but the furs still shimmered and the diamonds like sparkling shackles still clamped her wrists. The fur cap tilted randily on her head, she was always off to one of her "balls" where other honey-colored people dripped fur and glimmered and shone. She looked every inch the dowager.

They walked through a vine-choked archway. A narrow path bordered a two-story apartment building

in which Missy and Honey shared a home. Butch old lesbians who hunted and fished and brought back mounds of lobster and crab the women took to the kitchen and spent all day cleaning and cooking. Lulene's Aunt Missy had been beautiful, her hair, which fell to her knees, legendary.

At the back of the courtyard, beyond the swingset and the azalea-covered latticework sat Ethel's house. As the heavy oak door swung open, the smell of old things nearly knocked him down. Everything was huge inside. Sofas tensed on claws like lions in wait for prey. Bureaus sat brooding like Buddhas. Old pictures lined the wall outside the kitchen. Sepia-toned and cracked, there seemed to be hundreds of them, floor to ceiling. There were pictures of Lulene and her sister Shanice, born of different fathers, Lulene's a phantom Filipino who knocked up her mother and was dismissed; Shanice's some handsome black man sent packing for reasons no one bothered to remember. Lulene as a child, sitting on a pony, looking studied and proud even then, as Shanice looked on, plump, pretty, resenting Lulene's light skin and silky hair and preparing not to forgive the younger girl for blessings of beauty on top of those smaller gifts. Pictures showed Ethel draped in furs in '38, in clubs, with men, always men hovering about, drinks in hand, hair conked, mustaches trimmed; pretty women in cocktail dresses, walking on clouds of sound from horns so lush and rich you could have laid down on them and slept, Ellington, God's Trombones. They wore men like garments, perused them like sale

items. A man's loving was a virtue. Some offered that. Others paid for company. They married some, and slept with, sometimes loved, others. Ethel had a house full of what, with her, became antiques, gifts from men she married and left, or loved and outlived.

They danced at the top of the hill, these women and their men, unfettered by whites and their earthbound ways. Their shops, their streets, and their customs defined their own complete and melismatic world. They knew white folks hadn't a clue. Gingham and pewter. Whites knew nothing of silk. They might buy it, but they couldn't live it. Sure, when Ethel and Missy drove any distance they'd spend all day cooking, knowing they couldn't eat at white joints on the way. They'd travel in clothes to sleep in, knowing they'd rest in the car. They wanted their own, these people . . . their own hotels, and their own food and their own kind along the way. They resented being barred from that. They didn't want to mix. White folks lacked not only color, but sense. They couldn't know God. Not with their tepid songs and whispered prayers. God was just some unpleasant check on their appetites. Their God was an unwelcome guest; a reluctant place set for him at the table.

As a boy, Jessie studied those pictures on the wall, and the huge four-poster canopied bed and the fragile white lace coverthings on top and the women who owned them. Those pictures, the places in them and this bed and that sheer white lace were his birthright, and these women his sagging, aging Sirens.

"You want somethin' to eat, baby?" Missy'd ask him with her honeyed lilt.

"He's not hungry Aunt Missy. We just ate."

"Don't tell me he's not hungry, girl. He can talk."

"No thank you," his little voice chimed.

"Bullshit," she said as she went off for ice cream.

"Missy, leave that boy alone," Ethel drawled.

Missy liked to pump him for information. She held his father in undisguised contempt and thought Lulene a fool for marrying him. She stroked Jessie's hair.

"You're such a pretty boy. You look like Mae." Mae was her and Ethel's sister, Lulene's mother, a noted hellion who considered her youngest her pride and joy. "Thank God you don't look like that ugly motherfucker your mama married."

Ethel: "Don't you talk about that boy's Daddy, Missy."

Missy went on in conspiratorial tones. "It'd kill Mae to see the way he treats Lulene. She had all kinds of men after her. Pretty men, not like that countrified thing."

Missy wasn't fond of men at all. For as long as anyone remembered, she had lived in that one bedroom with Miss Honey. It was never said, never mentioned. It was just "Missy and Honey."

Mr. Richard walked through the room. The only name Jessie knew him by, "Mr. Richard." A stooped old man, balding, round, and gray-haired.

"That ol' fool," Missy mumbled.

Whether he lived in the house, or in Ethel's apartments, Jessie never knew. In this world of women, Mr. Richard was the only man. He had something to do

with Ethel. Perhaps an old lover, a current one, or even a legal husband. No one cared enough to say. Ethel would address him.

“You need somethin’, Richard?”

“Jus’ lookin’ around.”

Lulene spilled pleasantries. “How are you today, Mr. Richard. Are you feeling any better?”

“‘Bout the same.”

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with that ol’ fool but liquor,” Missy grumbled.

“You don’ know nothin’ ol’ woman,” shuffling toward the door. Shanice passed him on her way in. He gazed suddenly at the ground and bravely stayed his course as she paused to regard him contemptuously. Big and florid, Shanice was a grand thing, an experience. Her girdles and hose hissed like vipers with her every step, her perfume overwhelmed you and her bracelets and spangles clanked and clattered in a righteous cacophony.

“What you doin’ in here ol’ man.”

“I ain’t doin’ nothin’. You in here to beg.”

“Shut up old man.”

Her hair swooped and dipped, the big hourglass frame beneath it solid and sure. Those mighty hips swung wide arcs side to side in perfect time when she walked, like Fantasia’s dancing hippos, all that woman tottering gracefully on two thin, tall heels.

“Baby,” she sang as she sashayed to Jessie and took him in her arms, pressing him into her own full flesh, filling his ears and nostrils with her clanking and

perfume. She caressed his face with the palm of her hand, her smile so luscious and enveloping it bordered on sinful adoration.

“Lulene he looks even more like Mama.”

“Stop tellin’ that boy he looks like some woman,” Missy groused.

“You know I woulda brought you somethin’ baby, but Aunt Shanice is so poor.”

She darted toward Ethel. “Aunt Tee, I need some money.”

Shanice always begged money. Like all black single southern women, Shanice taught school. They all did. It was the proper occupation for well-bred young ladies. To deal with children, with innocence, to lavish their gifts selflessly on them in a pedagogical setting should they bear none of their own, was *de facto* fulfillment of their biologically female function. Somehow she had borrowed and thrown together enough cash to buy herself a home, a nice two-story affair which suffered more catastrophe than any domicile should. Hurricanes tore the roof off of it, rising waters flooded it, termites gnawed on it like sluts chewed bubble gum. It probably sat atop a private fault line just waiting to shake it to splinters. These endless calamities strained poor Shanice’s schoolteacher purse, but not as much as her love of frills and froufrou, lace curtains and round beds with gold and velvet headboards, baubles and spangles to wear, nectars and potions in which to bathe, and great big flashy cars in which to tote her great big flashy self. She never knew where the money

went. She lived the way she had been raised to regard herself. Like a Queen.

“Don’t you give that girl nothin,” warned Missy.

“Aunt Tee, I swear to you it’s for Little Mae.”

“That girl got a houseful o’ shit she don’t need.”

Ethel: “Hush up, Missy.”

Well into her thirties, Shanice had done what no one expected. She had married. His name was “Smith.” Just “Smith.” No first name, no last. He was a contractor. That was good. He made “good money.” It could have been the only reason for marrying him. That or desperation or the brink of madness. Smith did not speak. He mumbled. He sounded like Buckwheat on Quaaludes. An educated or refined man he was not. Clad always in T-shirts and work pants, he could be found laying on the sofa, sleeping, at all times. Most assumed she married him for free household repair service, of which she received much. That was a factor, but she also married him to have a child. Lulene and Shanice were both “illegitimate,” quite a stigma in their day, and she would not curse a child of hers to a similar fate. It’s hard to believe Smith was the best she could do. She probably just went about finding a father with the same planning and foresight with which she conducted her finances. He worked. He made money. He was potent. He was there. He would do.

Lulene insisted Smith was slow. “All that girl needs is an idiot child,” she said of her pregnant sister. She prepared little tests for Smith, often involving Jessie. “Go ask him to read to you.” Protest, protest. “Go on .

. . . I want to see what he says.”

“Smith,” he chirped at the prone figure on the green divan in Shanice’s house, “could you read me a story?”

“I’mawiltirerighna.”

“Thanks.”

“You see. You see. I bet he can’t read!”

Despite his assumed illiteracy, Lulene was not above demanding free home repairs herself. He was a man. She might as well make use of him.

Throughout Shanice’s pregnancy, the women feared for the child’s looks. They feared the offspring would not rise to the family’s demanding physical standards. They took solace in Lulene’s case, however. Despite her husband’s “ugliness,” her children were quite lovely. Understand that to these women, “Ugly” and “Dark” were pretty much synonymous. Smith could have been, pound for pound, identical, but if he were light-skinned, would have been deemed acceptable. Shanice herself was “dark,” a handicap in her relations’ eyes. (Probably why she waited so long to marry, and probably why she had done no better than the somnambulistic, mumbling, illiterate Smith.)

The child “Little Mae” was born and was, alas, dark, but all admitted, cute. There was hope. Shanice fixed her fantastic attentions on the newborn, dressing her up like a Victorian doll in white lace and ruffles, booties with pink laces, bows in her three strands of hair. None were sure if Smith realized he had fathered a child. He’d pass the bassinet and peer into it, puzzled, as if a large fish lay wrapped in diapers.

Shanice “lived for that child.” Smith was forgotten. Shanice never held him in high regard. It was assumed she suffered sex with him once. He now sank further in her eyes. Finally, she asked him to leave. He refused. He became belligerent. Ugly and useless she could deal with. Ugly, useless *and* belligerent—No. One day, while he—what else—slept, she took a lit match and touched it to the pre-flame retardant green divan on which he napped. He woke to blue and yellow dancing flames. As he swatted the flames like a swarm of bats, Shanice warned, “Next time,” her child in her arms, “I’ll kill you.” He left the next day.

The women invaded Shanice’s home, caring for the child, teaching it life’s early lessons. Lulene took it on herself to teach the child her first word.

“Shit,” she grinned, leaning over the cradle. “Say ‘shit.’” Jessie tittered mindlessly, Janice scowled disapprovingly, and Talia grinned absently.

Shanice showed her love for Little Mae through food. The child soon grew fat. However, if it killed both Shanice and the child, she would be pretty. Her layers of fat were thus wrapped with frilly pink dresses and white patent shoes. At night, Mae sat attentive and dreadful on a kitchen chair while Shanice stood at the stove, hot iron comb stinking up the air over a gas flame. Shanice stood like a stevedore in the coal belly of a ship, skin beaded with sweat from the heat. Once the iron comb was sizzling hot, Shanice grabbed it and yanked and singe-combed the little girl’s nappy hair straight and shiny, then bullied it into some ornate

shape, Mae's face contorting with pain from the pulling and the burns. It was all for the girl's own good. For Pretty. Maybe if someone had worked on Shanice, she wouldn't have wound up with Smith. She wouldn't have grown big and spent so much on pretty things and envied Lulene her light skin and silky hair and for better or worse a man in the house, and children, honey toned and bright. The girl would be pretty, and merit the gifts of a pretty girl.

"Blood!"

This was a greeting. Jessie's father, arm outstretched for a manly handshake, walked toward a prosperous looking man on this dusty cowtown street. Modest houses dotted the endlessly flat plain and the gray sky sat so low and angry it looked eager to crush them. The man's name was "Blood."

"Man you got too much money," Grandier yelled. "You gettin' fat." He laughed with his pink tongue peeking twixt his lips, air shooting past as if in failed whistles. Jessie hated that laugh. He counted the seconds until Blood's descent. He eyed the two hearses parked on the lawn, and wondered if corpses lay inside.

Prattville, Louisiana. Birthplace of the Grandier clan.

"Workin' hard. Workin' hard," Blood replied. "Ooh, and lookahere." Thus, it began. "This boy gettin' big.

Gonna be a football player. Hyech, hyech.” The laugh sounded like a huge cat with a hairball. “How you doin’, Junior?” If there was one thing he hated more than his father’s laugh, it was being called “Junior.”

“Nope. Not Junior,” his father corrected. “I don’t want nobody callin’ him Junior.”

“No lie.”

“That’s right. This is Jessie Grandier The Second.”

“Ain’t that fine.”

“No. Not fine. I just didn’t want no ‘Junior.’ It’s right there on his birth certificate.”

Jessie did have *something* for which to thank the man. “That’s all right. I’ll jus’ call him Jessieboy like all the rest of ‘em do.

Gee, thanks.

“Bet you beatin’ off those little girls, huh?”

Weak grin.

“Big ol’ thing, too. You play football?”

Disinterested shake of the head.

“Whatchoo mean? Big as this boy is he don’t play football?”

Sorry, Jessie thought, I know it’s a racial imperative and all, but I’m so busy with my needlepoint I haven’t the time.

“Bet you got yourself lots o’ women. Just like yo Daddy. Hyech, hyech.”

“Nope. Lulene’s all the women I need.”

“Where is that pretty gal.”

She stayed behind because people like you make her puke.

“She’s down at Ruby’s.”

“You tell her she better come on down and see ol’ Blood. Come on in. Come on in. Marybelle wants to see you.”

Jessie ached to see her again. The fattest woman in the world. And each year, each time Jessie came, she sat there, even bigger. Soon she would fill the house, her flesh popping out the windows and doorways. She and the house would become one. She would wear it like clothes.

That house was always dark, shades drawn, and thick with people. Blood ushered them in and Grandier greeted all the men sitting in the flickering blue light of a TV ballgame, up and shouting one minute, and sitting with a squish on the plastic-coated furniture the next. Jessie saw the women in the kitchen, as usual, cooking, pungent smells, heat and steam rising from their pots. And yes, all alone on a large, cushioned living room chair she sat. Marybelle, Blood’s wife. The flesh rolled off her in waves and practically settled in fabric-like folds on the floor. Her upper arms were the size of hams, her legs like gelatinous tree stumps. It was like pictures of termite hives, the grotesque translucent queen too big to move. Her face was frozen in a mask of fat. He never saw her speak. She just sat there, and grew. Once, he accidentally walked through double doors at the back of the house and found dead bodies lying on gurneys. The men laughed at Jessie’s mistake. The two hearses sat out front, waiting to collect more dead. Marybelle sat there, the enormous queen of of

Plattville's dead and dying. Blood was the undertaker, rich, his business good.

Plattville, Louisiana. Birthplace of the Grandier clan.

It was always Jessie, his father, and his mother. His two sisters stayed behind. The trips were made on Jessie's account. His father had fathered a son. Thirteen children in the Grandier clan, and he the only male who'd borne a son. These trips displayed the pride, the family's future—which Grandier owned. The trips were antidotes to excessive draughts of Lulene's kin, those uppity old yellow women who, Grandier knew, poisoned the boy's mind against the paternal clan.

They'd travel through the gleaming New Orleans airport to a dun-colored addition hidden out back, which housed an airline routed to places you'd rather die than go. He was sure Hell was on its itinerary, and feared that, to visit kin, his father might book a trip.

In flight, Jessie nursed a Coke while his father made vulgar with the stewardess.

"I flew better 'n this in Korea. Tthth. Tthth."

Lulene sat inscrutable and silent. Voluble and playful when alone with Jessie and her girls, she bore herself like a specter when with Grandier. She offered nothing.

Not even this airline went close to Plattville. They deplaned in some pasture, chemical plants looming huge in the distance, spewing smoke from shiny silver stacks, further antagonizing the low, angry sky. A car was rented and driven for an hour, for all of which Jessie pretended to sleep. The town approached when you saw the shacks. "Rustigold" Lulene called

them. A color she invented—rust mixed with rotted wood when attacked by sunlight. Jessie thought them abandoned until he saw black folks outside, sitting on tattered chairs on porches, as if they'd waited lifetimes for a parade they'd deluded themselves into believing would pass.

This particular trip had special meaning. Jessie would view his legacy. The Land. His father always spoke of it. The Land in Plattville. Something he would inherit when Grandier died, and oh how Grandier loved to discuss what would happen when he died. "When I die, I don't want you to sell nothin' in Plattville." "When I die, don't you let nobody cheat you out of that land in Plattville," as if he would trade it for nylons and chocolate.

They drove through the poorest sections of town, the black parts of town, to arrive at Aunt Ruby's house. Jessie took for granted there was little else to Plattville, just shacks and broken-down clapboard boxes full of poor black people. Years later, on another trip, he found lovely tree-lined neighborhoods, large, well-tended lawns fronting fresh white paint on the large, Deep South-style wooden homes. Walking past he saw white people, something he had never seen there. He passed a store and entered. It was chock full of them—white people—and rare for Plattville, the aisles were well-stocked. He picked some items, paid for them, and left. Returning to Ruby's, she eyed the bag sharply.

"Where'd you get this?"

"At the store."

"You went over to Grayson's?"

“Yeah.”

“All the way over there?”

“Yeah.

“There’re places closer.”

“I felt like walking. I just wound up there.”

She paused. “How’d they treat you?”

He was shocked at the question. “Fine. What’s wrong?” He didn’t realize what the color line still meant down there.

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

She paused. “It’s real nice out there, ain’t it?” she said, as if he had visited someplace she only read about in books. She hid a hint of steel in her voice, as if she’d spent a lifetime numbing herself to the fury that such things weren’t available in her own neighborhood.

Ruby still lived in the Grandier home, where those thirteen had been born. It sat, a little faded but still acceptably intact, next door to a crumbling house which still held tenants, like hostages, and an overpriced coin-operated laundrymat, both of which Jessie’s father owned.

Their rented car pulled up to the house, windows shut tight and air conditioner blasting against the heat and humidity. Ruby, her husband Darrell, daughter Tisha, and toddler son Dwayne gathered on the porch in greeting.

Stately, Lulene, shades on, stepped out of the car. A smile came on cue, and she waved. Once acknowledged, Ruby tumbled down the porch steps.

The women hugged. Stiflingly hot, wet air invaded the car. Jessie pushed the front seat forward and stepped out seeking relief. None came.

“You got air conditionin’ an’ everythin’ in there,” Ruby exclaimed.

“I don’ drive *nothin’* but the best.”

“Grandier,” admonished Lulene at the boast.

“It’s the truth.”

“How’ve you been, Ruby?” Lulene asked.

“Oh . . . the flesh is heavy but the good Lord sees me through.”

“How’s Tisha.”

“She’s holdin’ up.”

Tisha stood on the porch with her right arm stuck to her face. The flesh on her arm was adhered to her face as if she had lain down to a languorous sleep and awakened unable to move. She had been burned. In that old house heat came from red hot coils. In the bathroom, in a nightgown, she caught fire. Doctors had fastened her arm to her head to graft new skin. She was about sixteen. Next to her stood Ruby and Darrell’s only son, Dwayne, only four or five but already the most disgusting child on earth. His limbs were dotted with sores like freckles, open, oozing and red on his brown skin—mosquito bites, ant bites, cuts that he picked at and which festered. Jessie’d once seen him eat a roach.

“Jessieboy!” Ruby hugged him. She was big, like all the folks in Grandier’s family. Jessie’s father was the shortest of the men at six feet even. Ruby stood eye to eye to her twin. They looked nothing alike. He was a

stocky, sharp-featured brown man whose every move displayed military swagger. Everything about her was soft, her features, her plumpness, her sweetened vocal tones. On her arm was a large six-inch scar, raised smooth skin half an inch across, stitch marks lining it on either side like train tracks. Even young Jessie knew no white woman, no moneyed man, would bear such a scar. No rich man's doctor would be so careless in his needlework. That scar defined her in his eyes. It wouldn't happen, he thought, in his family.

Since birth, Jessie'd witnessed two different and constructive modes of self-preservation: his father's military bullying, and his mother's suave intimidation. Grandier was fearless, cigar between two fingers, head jolting backwards in emphasis, the subliminal threat of physical force despite his mouth, from the first, displaying a hint of a victorious grin. Early on, Lulene learned the advantage of beauty, and took it. The exotic face, a bit Asian, maybe Indian, black, no one knew, couturier clones she made herself and wore like mantles, her manner polite, a trace distant, emitting the barbed fragrance of masterly control. As a woman, Ruby had learned none of the former; as plain, she could not know the latter.

There was a leper colony nearby. Her husband worked there.

During the ride to view The Land, Grandier and Blood talked old times and old acquaintances. They pulled off a two-lane road and jumped from the car. Jessie was loathe to leave the air-conditioned comfort

for the stiff air outside, but followed. They stood facing a line of trees, about twenty feet of weeds separating them from a thick tangle of greenish swamp vegetation set in mud beyond which you couldn't see a thing.

"Here it is," Grandier announced grandly.

"What?"

"This The Land."

"Oh"

"I know it don't look like much, but it goes on all across there."

"Where?"

"Behind them trees there, Junior," Blood confirmed.

"Where?"

"All around there, boy!" Grandier insisted, testily.

"I can't see anything . . ."

"What's the matter with you, boy? All around here," Grandier assured, testily.

"It looks like a bog." Jessie blurted, incredulous.

"Goddammit boy, there are 100 acres a land out there. Look right between them trees there."

Seeing nothing more than swamp, he thought it best to nod and smile. It worked. The men looked down and beamed, satisfied.

Blood shook his head in wonderment. "All this gonna be yours someday, Junior."