

But dying can mean salvation, too. That's how I heard it from the folks at Granny Allen's church; of course, none of them talking about the end really know it one way or the other. Their speculation just makes damn good sense running through my head with the granddaughter's spinning words.

"Ten years you known me." I only recognize that I'm yelling watching Ta's face cringe at every third syllable. "Shoulda come to figure I ain't the type to be about no half-ass bullshit. I look like a blue collar factory nigga? Ain't bout to be one to pay your rent."

"My rent?" She laughs this spiteful laugh. "Didn't figure you as the type to stand on a corner dealing dime bags neither. Takes a special kinda genius, I guess . . ."

"Shhh!" I point to the apartment's thin plaster. "Wasn't standing on no corner. Are you sick?"

"Are you?" Ta laughs from the vulva, amused this time. "What the hell were you doing?"

I sit in the reclining chair. "Not a damn thing more than what we talked bout me doing already. Talked in circles, here, there, then talked it here again. Round and round. But if it's all right over here, girl, it can't suddenly be all criminal when the conversation comes back around. Makes you out to be a phony hypocrite in the circle. You're talking like I was out there slinging crack."

"First of all, the shit was never okay with me. Don't insult me. You said you were doing it for a minute to take care of what was standing overdue, nothing more."

"Ain't been no longer than that. Nothing but a minute passed here—"

The roll of her eyes hypnotizes. “I’m talking,” she pierces my ears, and the walls, and my trance too. “Second of all, you might as well been dealing crack. Ain’t gonna have mercy on you no ways.”

“Who? You?”

“Them—they ain’t got mercy for you. Them peoples don’t care nothing bout the substance, long as they found it sitting snug against your ass.”

I smile, mean for it to show full of wickedness. “If I’d been moving rocks instead of a little smoke, I wouldn’t look so useless in those eyes, I bet. You woulda liked that cash, no? If I gotta go down, might as well get myself good and filthy dirty on the way, phat paid, do it right. That’s how y’all think over on Oglesby. Fuckin niggas.”

“What the hell are you rambling?” Ta sits on the love seat to my right, blue suit cringing around her waist and skirt riding to her knees “Shut up talking garbage to me. I’m done with you.”

I laugh, nowhere near spiteful as her, not in my ears. “For good?”

“That what you want?” Dawn cries in the kitchen high chair. “Keep talking. It’s hard out here on your own, goddamnit.”

Threat, plea or warning, I don’t know. These are my wife’s feelings, not mine. Years joined at a tin band covered in twinkling paint, and she could mean all three at the same time. “Yeah,” I blink long, “You would’ve had mercy on me if I’d gotten real dirty paid.”

She jogs off to the kitchen to tend to Dawn’s afternoon hunger, true mama that she is. I recline my chair and turn off this five o’clock news and its long forgotten blare.

While I was in Carbondale, Ta finished schooling at Chicago State's commuter campus on 95th and King Drive. No shame in that place; Chicago State is not much different than Southern Illinois from what I've seen. But I went away from the corners to get a degree, and that means a lot of something special to those who never left. I've thrown her for some kind of a loop here. So I can't blame Ta for the rage spewing from those thick lips. In the Four Corners, commuter school honeys are supposed to go wrong before us campus town clowns. Maybe they end up with three illegitimate babies running around a one-bedroom apartment, or sucking on a pipe over on the East End, or stripping and hooking for some down low pimp. Those that do make it survive on noble, low-end scraps, head held barely above the water's surface to allow proud, bare air.

My wife came up over on Oglesby, the Seventies blocks of Oglesby where weeds grow from cracks in the concrete, and they've got as many cardboard box-tops covering window holes as they've got glass. A Chicago State honey's Oglesby Avenue, where tire rubber rips and screeches and sirens whirr and wail and that *pop-crack* sounds one after the other come summertime, until you pray to Lord Jesus that it's just the noise of cheap firecrackers some knucklehead set off in celebration of America's independence, though the Fourth is still almost a month away.

Never told Ta about how I sat in a white Uptown room with fiends just to the left of my testifying mother and her blue book. If I had, at least the woman might understand where I went wrong, and she could figure some kind of sense out of this. Maybe. But her Granny Allen was a good Baptist—the rock of old Oglesby Ave—whose deadly vice was Hostess snacks, and I was their good negro and Ta was so fine and thick and sweet to the eye. Never told the child a damn thing that would've made her think twice about

letting me lose myself in chestnut eyes or between bare hips as she swallowed with thighs wet and warm. Maybe Mama was only on Step Five, but she didn't raise no fools.

Been different since I came to understand our togetherness as a trade-off. Took five, six years, but it's just like everything else: I look at her and I love her, and she loves me back, and we loved each other for years and it feels good and she keeps looking so good and sounding sweet and pure. No matter—can't keep loving another soul in this place, then get love in return, without the question of payback rearing. That's the only way you know it's real in the Four Corners:

"I love you, so let's buy rings,"

"I love you, baby, so let's sign these papers,"

"I love you, let's get jobs and cars and, one day, a house in the South Burbs."

"I love you always, love. Let's drop a seedling, so it's not just you and me loving, and let's buy our offspring new clothes and cornered playpens of mesh bars and let's buy her factory milk and diplomas and degrees so she knows to grow into a carrot in this world, not an apple, and let's give her the office you once used to make a living for us, let's turn that space into a baby room as you won't be needing it now. Our life is made already."

Loving ain't real around here until you go to the loan shark and accept his points to barter yourself some trinkets to make the love shine. Funny, I didn't figure this out until after I'd used up all of my credit with Primo the Shark from 51st Street; this band on the ring finger is all faded and dull now, while I'm still paying on his points .

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Let my mother tell it, this is what she stayed drunk and high on an assembly line for anyway, to numb the pain of eyes crying bloody tears just to clean her seed of four corner muck. I was supposed to come back to this place different and better than this, me and Cousin Remi both, degreed to the hilt. Educated and offering salvation to the hustling dark masses in civilized, golden chalices. Not weed smoke. And then to get caught on these corners, getting down, dirty, and more broke than paid, just the same as all the rest of the limping souls? Embarrassing my mother and shaming souls full of hope, no different than a couple of 79th Street thugs—"hoodlums," like Granny Allen called them. After that old Oglesby Avenue woman went and convinced her girl child that I was a good negro, and the Downstate folk exiled Remi just so one of us could finish up right. All this trouble borne, just for me.

My own bones should be full of as much shame as Ta's and Mama's are of purple rage. But to be honest, I ain't hurting at all inside this skin. Reclined in my good nineteen-inch babble box chair, these bones aren't shamed or angry or even aching from a night spent propped against a cracked cell wall. Mama and Ta can stay mad all they want then, and swim in shame on my behalf if it makes them feel righteous about how I drown—all I know is what's reflected on a television screen, these tales babbled about how I ain't the one who had it all wrong for so long.

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We lived in a first floor crib off 71st and Merrill for a bit, just outside the Corners. Auntie De would come by to watch over me while Mama was working at the plant, leaving Remi with his uncles to learn their East End hustle.

Auntie De's time was always free come June time, see, because Blackbird couldn't keep a job once summer heat hit good. She'd sit with me until her attention wandered from the TV screen, or until the phone rang with one of those guitar-strumming, jive-humming cats calling after her love. Once that wanderlust hit, De'd take her a walk to the corner store—a full hour's walk, though the Asian's rotten joint wasn't but four blocks from our place.

“Just goin to smoke on me some squares, and get a fresh pack,” she'd say, though our living room's walls and couch pillows and Montgomery Wards drapes already stunk with the burning funk of Camels and Cools, left by uncles from the plant floor and the lounges' mack-daddy booths. Mama'd never uttered a cross word to those fools as they lit fire to our air.

“Why you gotta go, Auntie?”

“Just bout to take me a walk real quick. Catch some air. Sides, don't wanna smoke up you all's place. You know how your Mama be. Don't be telling her I left you when she come home neither. Promise to be good and I'll bring you something back. You want something brung back, don't you?”

“No—you got two more cigarettes in your box. I see um. Mama don't care about you smoking up in here. Why you gotta go, Auntie? How come I can't walk with you?”

“Just getting me some air, Tommie,” she’d say with this smile juking and hiding across ruby lips, and freckles lighting at the tip of her nose. “Sure you don’t want nothing brung, my love?”

“Just come back home, Auntie love.” Then De’d leave for her hour walk, that not quite empty box of Newports pressed against her pokey left nipple.

Once “Tennessee Tuxedo” ended on Channel 60, I’d know thirty minutes had already passed; and because I didn’t care for punk-ass “Underdog” afterwards, I’d prop myself at the front window and count each minute slow. Time passing in pasty clouds floating high, until the silver and red IC train shot by on the 71st Street tracks in my left eye, headed from Indiana to Downtown through Stony Island then back again to the Sticks. Every summer day, minutes raced with the Four Corner fools to catch up to that sleek caboose headed northwest. Folks running past, but never fast enough, for the midday train always left a few fools puffing dust on the tracks. IC rode on without explaining why I couldn’t walk with Auntie De either.

I pressed my head against hot glass this one June day back then. Counted ten trains passing, and Underdog and Woody Woodpecker and Popeye and the Avengers, all of them had finished screaming about saving my world from the UHF dial (destroying or saving—maybe both at once, destroying mine and saving their own) and the sun tilted just a little bit from the lake so Merrill Avenue’s brownstone buildings cast enough shade to cool the forehead. Auntie De still wasn’t nowhere to be seen, and Mama wouldn’t be home from South Chicago Heights for another two hours.

My eyes strained from sun beating against the dome magnified by window glass, and thoughts spun dizzy up inside my skull. Mama always told me to wear a hat in the

summer months especially, to protect my head from that dizzy heat stroke pain brought by high hanging sun; then again, that dizziness could've been brung by the bloody breath churning between chest and thighs, panting to see Auntie's De's nipples poke from the thin T-shirts and Woolworths bras she wore come June-time. Sharp and high on her body those triangles, and so unlike her big sister's mounds rounded dull from pressing against assembly line levers.

Maybe my sweet Auntie had just caught the Jeffrey line bus to pick up her social security check at the fed office (all Remi's old man'd left De with, let Mama tell it. "May be all," Auntie'd screech back, "but it's a hell-a-bit more than you . . ."). De had such trifling ways, like they used to say between our blocks. Mama claimed the reason I'd turned out such a bright baby boy and Cousin Remi came up such an alley thug was that my old girl was kind enough to prop her nipples between my lips to suck milk dripping from mounds that were once sharp, too. While Auntie Denise was always too happy and selfish to stop running and wining and smoking with crap shooters and gray-haired slicksters to think of cleaning herself up for cuz to sip his good nurturing. That's what Mama'd tell me whenever I'd start talking that ungrateful nonsense of mine.

So I knew at twelve years old that it was mostly my doing, that I brought the sag to Doreen's chest; as much as slaving to build those Escorts. Remi, he got the Mama who wandered about cracked streets but kept her nipples primed and pointed and let him hustle the Four Corners with the real players because it freed her to do her thing. Me, I got the lady all dull and scarred from struggling in the fields and returning everyday to this cracked smoke and wine and muthafuckin living over here. This nurturing Mama who left me pinned to the window glass watching trains and folks running in vain and

waiting for some sign to point out love's return, but finding only shade trailing behind a faded sun.

Sounds shook the window, any sounds, didn't have to be that *pop-crack* from the blocks behind, could've been tires tearing concrete or steel against steel or ambulances racing to Jackson Park Hospital—or the echo between a fading cartoon and an Apple Jacks commercial, maybe. Sounds shook, and I'd know their quaking as the noises of love's end. Mama and De were all gone from this place, I knew—dead and gone to me somehow. My head pressed harder against that window, and I was alone, sweat dripping the forehead, skin tingling the crotch, feet tapping hardwood, all alone in body. But if there wasn't love for me to wait out in that window, just speeding trains, shifting sun, and hopeless souls, all headed far away, would I at least never feel so alone again?

Another train passed north, and it wasn't three o'clock just yet, so the floor supervisor had yet to find Mama overdosed in front of the catalytic converter belt, and Auntie De had wandered her pointy nipples too near the train tracks somewhere out there. Such a death only came for Auntie, of course, because I'd wasted seed the night before dreaming of her pointy points, spilling creamy incest all over my He-Man/She-Ra pajama bottoms and navy blue sheets to stain. Death'd snatched auntie love as she walked to the Asians' store after I'd violated her—and she had to pay for my sin. She was the grown soul, after all, the one who should've known better than wearing see-through shirts with menthol boxes pressed against tits full of un-sipped milk, tingling in between a boy's legs till a bloody boner popped out of my drawers to match her perfection, almost match sweet perfection.

I lit a match from the booklet Auntie'd left on the cocktail table. Lit it to see, or to pay honor to my fallen nurturing life-giver and my afternoon protector. Lit that match to shine them a clear path to escape death and come back to the Corners. Or maybe I raised the flame looking for an answer to my questions, "Why you gotta go? How come I can't walk with you?"

So much time gone by now, how do I know what dreams a boy conjured in the shade passing on Merrill Avenue? I do remember watching that flame stroll down to my fingertip, where, just before heat blackened yellow palm skin, fire laughed at me—wicked, knowing and low—and jumped off its match stem, freed itself all on our living room wall.

Soon as mocking heat touched plaster surface, a million more laughing, dancing flames shook flickering asses against white plaster, and the room went up. I ran to the kitchen, fire chasing at my tail, coughing and still hard for my lost love and eyes wide as sun-shaming heat grew and spread to full life in the apartment. I took a safe watching place in the kitchen, far enough away that black smoke hadn't swallowed air just yet. Stood on top of my favorite eating chair to see the burning through that doorway; I watched our lamp shade melting and plaster peeling down from the ceiling, saw how those white walls turned gray and then black as sky over the nighttime lake, just before paint crinkled and smoke swirled without choking my corner just yet. Close enough to let me see the bristles of Mama's shag rug float from the floor, before flames paused their mocking to gulp away the debris. Hard-nut wilted only as fire jumped up to the living room window so the IC tracks and Merrill Avenue and the neighborhood folks chasing after trains were gone from eye.

I stood on tiptoes, gagging and slobbering by then, as the legs to the side table where I'd propped myself melted and its glass top crashed. Fire didn't dare touch our color TV screen though. Smoke swirled all about its brown cabinet and flames marched up to chomp away the rest of the living room carpet, then stopped right before the last of the afternoon cartoons, "The Amazing Spiderman." Flaming, mock laughter quieted long enough to let the intro play:

Spiderman, Spiderman . . . does whatever a spider can . . . spins a web . . . any size . . . catches thieves. . . . just like flies . . . Lookout . . . Here comes the Spiderman.

I never thought of dying on top of my favorite eating chair. Not even as the lead smoke got to choking me. Death may be a muthafucka in a white hood, but he don't come for twelve-year old knuckleheads, not when they're dreaming, and definitely not when they sing the Spiderman song.

Auntie De and her new sugar daddy busted in just as the living room couch disappeared and I'd hopped up to the counter-top as the chair cushions'd turned hot to the soles. Sugar daddy ran through that smoke with his head down—all I saw coming at me was a black bald-spot rimmed in gray and his forearm shielding the face from smoke. Snatched me off the counter and wrapped my ass in his leather trench coat, he did. Why was sugar daddy wearing a trench in hot June daytime? Cause he was a true player, pimping South Shore's Four Corners, ready to do anything—live or die, run or burn—to get between the thick legs of my auntie love. That's why.

Thank God for nigganess that burning day. Sugar daddy grabbed me up from that counter and ran down the three-flat entry steps, out to freedom on Merrill Avenue.

By the time Mama showed up from the plant, the fire department trucks clogged our block between the tracks and 72nd Street; more swirling, mocking lights to dim the

damning sun almost completely gone for the day. Our potbelly landlord leaned against the busted light post in his front yard, smacking tobacco against his right side teeth, one eyeball watching me hide snug under Auntie De's arms, while the other peeled on my mother crying to the cops at curbside.

The top of my nappy afro nudged against perky heaven, right there next to sugar daddy in his smoky trench coat. Nigga hadn't shed a lick of sweat yet, not running into those flames, not running out, and not even standing in the late day funk of our burnt blocks. He was still doing whatever a sugar daddy had to do make my love into his own—where's the sweat to that for a sugar daddy pimp in a long leather coat?

Mama stood with us finally, took me by the hand and pulled me from her trifling—as they called such women in the Corners—sister, just so slightly, but not strong enough. Leave it to me, nothing would ever take me from second heaven, not even knowing that my true, true love had resurrected off the factory floor and come back home to me. I wouldn't let go De until tears streaked from Mama's eyes, and the *gu-ug* sound whimpered from rust-chapped lips. Then the city firemen crashed out the living room window, that hole where I'd propped and pressed my forehead to wait—their black hero bats shattering glass to let smoke free to swallow the sun left over our home.

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The 3:54 IC train did run Auntie De over not six months later. Auntie and sugar daddy'd gone and gotten lit at the Soft Steppin, then took a walk along the tracks. Drunk fools stumbling along so bubbly, half a block from the next odd-numbered IC stops; and

that silver and red steel train came speeding along its southeast bound way, as they do midday, ripping through the streets fast enough to sideswipe Auntie into the wig shop just past Clyde Avenue.

Mama blamed my sugar daddy hero, rambled on about how he'd slap auntie upside the skull whenever she'd get to spitting her fool back talk. *Maybe De'd started flapping her sassy-ass mouth out on 71st after sugar daddy'd covered for all her drinks at the Steppin, and he'd got his full of that nonsense.* That was how Mama's teary speculation went: sugar daddy, fed up and floating high off that free-base while swimming low off sauce wine all at once, pushed my love into the IC, timing its approach just right.

I didn't buy it first off, not at all, not the hero who'd saved me from flames just because he wanted to impress Auntie De. Why would he hurt her? Steal those sweet, pointy nipples full of fresh love from me, sure, but just to leave her mangled and chopped in window glass? Never. Mama rolled eyes full of salty water and crust at my foolish-ass argument. *Haha*, she laughed in her breath-choking way. *You never underestimate the doings of a sugar daddy nigga*, she said, *especially when he's already gotten all he truly wanted. They're beasts*, she told me, *all of them.*

And after he didn't show for Auntie's homegoing, what could I say? That's what Mama and them called De's services, just like folks would call Granny Allen's burial years later—high-low holy rollers dropped Ta's grandmother under dirt and had the nerve to name it a "homegoing" party. Bunch of fools full of pain pretending it ain't right to cry at the sight of an old woman's cancerous bones sinking down deep in the ground.

Homegoing at least seemed a proper name for Auntie's services. Love never seemed like she belonged to this place no ways. Maybe wherever the IC train took her off to really was something more like home for Auntie. Still couldn't blame sugar daddy, not my hero—sugar daddy knew to save me from the flames and push De into that train. It's a rare thing, for a soul to understand the difference between one who belongs in these four corners and one looking to go on to their rightful home.

Most dark daddies spend their time either saving or killing all they come across, either/or without pausing to ask the question who belongs where—how could he join her homegoing party after making that mighty call? Sugar daddy sat at the Soft Steppin bar instead, filling himself with wine and waiting for something like that moment of clarity to grace him. And it was true clarity that pushed love into a train speeding south and east. Sugar daddies ain't all beasts, Mama's wrong about this. They're drunk and high off that base, true, but when they run into flames to save an idiot boy, some dark daddies are heroes and saviors all at once. Even if they did just get fed-up of all that sassy backtalk from love's fine, twisted bones.

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