

Fall 1974

There I was, in a thick gray coat, with a knit cap tight around my head, sitting in that waiting room. It was so warm that I'd unzipped my coat and sat with it thrown open. Beads of moisture trickled down my forehead and slipped into the creases beneath my chin. I was waiting, just like everybody else, for news of something unknown, something important. And I couldn't help but stare at the other people in the room.

The man across from me sat holding his arm folded to his chest. He wore some sort of uniform, tight white shorts and a matching tee shirt, with a red stripe across his chest. He watched, his eyes as nervous as mine, as a small white woman approached him. She gently pulled away the cloth that was wrapped around his hand, exposing a twisted lump of a fist, moist and red, with something poking out that looked like the leg bone of a chicken. The woman studied it with calm eyes, nodded, then helped him rise and led him out of the room.

My gaze drifted for a moment, but settled quickly on a boy just a little older than myself. His legs and arms were as thin as sticks, but his head was enlarged and strangely shaped. The longer I watched him, the more his head looked like an enormous apple. He was staring at his hands. He clapped them together slowly, with an awed concentration, as if this very motion was something new to him. I couldn't help wondering if the boy could swim. Would his head drag him down like a weight, or would it lift him to the surface like an inflatable ball? Maybe he would end up upside down at the bottom of the

ocean, pinned to the sand by his head. Or maybe he could hold his breath like dolphins do...

Just then the clicking of my mother's shoes cut into my thoughts. I turned and there she was, Joyce Carter, my mother. Her face, which I thought so beautiful in its full features and rich, dark coloring, was frigid as she walked toward me. Her long jacket swirled behind her as if she were fighting against the wind, and her purse bumped her side with each step. She stretched her hand out toward me. "Let's go."

I touched my feet to the ground, took her hand and had just begun to say, "Momma, that boy over there look-" when I was jerked into motion. Momma strode off, with my small steps doubling to keep up with her large ones. I glanced up at her face, but couldn't see it, so high above me and hidden behind the collar of her jacket. Instead, I looked down, and followed the colored lines that ran along the tiles. They intersected and diverged, like the lines of a subway map. "Momma, how come there's lines? This goes to the Metro-train?"

She didn't answer. We walked across the parking lot to our car, a dark blue Volkswagen Bug, with a long scratch along the door. I placed a finger in the groove and traced its course until Momma pushed me into the car. As she climbed in behind the steering wheel, I reached down and picked up a book from the clutter on the floor. I held it in my lap and waited for the familiar roar of the car starting.

Momma put a key in the ignition, but held it there for a long moment without turning it. She moved her hands up to the steering wheel and sat gazing out the window, focused on something in the distance. Her eyes were the same dark color as my own, and there was a similar character in the flare of her nostrils and the jagged wrinkles of her

forehead, features which, I've noticed, have grown even more similar as we've both aged. She was silent for some time, and when she finally spoke, she did so in a voice steadied only by the deep breaths she took between words. "Tony... your father passed away. They said they did all they could for him. But he's gone. You hear?"

Something in the tone of her voice, its strange hesitance, and the fact that she used my name, gripped me like a cold embrace. I lowered my eyes to her car keys, which still dangled in the ignition. "Yes, Momma."

"They said... they were sorry." She lifted her hand from the steering wheel and touched my wrist. "We'll be okay. Hear me, baby? We're gonna' keep going and do all right. Understand?"

"Yes, Momma," I said, but really I didn't understand. What was *passed away*? Where had he gone to that made her voice so unsteady? Just a few hours ago Daddy had left for the store, with his hat on, walking backwards, pretending to be an old man, bent over and sucking his gums, talking as if he had pebbles on his tongue. Hadn't things been normal then, just a few hours ago, before all of the whispered phone conversations and heavy silences of the afternoon?

As the car started and moved off, I asked, "Momma, what's *passed away* mean?"

At first she didn't answer. There was just silence, the whir of the engine, the thump of the car hitting bumps in the pavement. Eventually, she exhaled, reached down and groped around in her purse, pulling out a pack of cigarettes. She held it up and peered inside. "It just means he's dead, baby. That's all. It means he left us." She tossed the empty pack down to the floor, where it settled among the clutter at my feet. "Now it's just you and me."



That's where I began. Perhaps, in many ways, that's where my understanding of my mother began also: the chill in her voice, the clipped tone, her sharp movements. Any emotion was hidden beneath that thin, but effective surface. As much as I loved her and needed her in those early years, I feared the part of her that seemed to cut off my father so completely. Not understanding where it came from, and not understanding where my father had gone to, it seemed to me that my mother had something near the power to erase a man. Or, at least, some hard core which allowed her to forge ahead unaffected, alone. It was only in recent years that I've gained some understanding of who she was.

Momma had just turned twenty-one when she first met my father, in the fall of 1967. Nine months before that, on a frigid winter night, her parents, my grandparents, died in their old drafty rowhouse in South East Washington, D. C.. As my mother tells it, they had been one of those old couples we might all wish to be like. They had grown so used to each other that they seemed to speak from different regions of the same mind, move with different limbs of the same body, and look upon each other with the casual acceptance that one looks upon one's own reflection. They dealt with life's trials with a resigned faith in each other, in their two daughters, and in God. Perhaps it was this same resignation that contented them to live in that house for almost forty years, even though rats patrolled the streets like nightly rioters, even though the basement dripped with a constant moisture and the pipes in the wall beside their bed would shudder violently at odd hours, for reasons no plumber could explain. And, more important than all of those, they contented themselves with the chills of winter that slipped beneath doors, through

cracks in windows, even, it seemed, through the old walls themselves.

That's why, one unusually cold January night, they covered the windows with plastic and stuffed the cracks in the doors with old rags. These were their customary insulations for truly cold nights. But that fateful evening they sealed the house so well that the old couple slept their way into death, quietly asphyxiated by a carbon monoxide leak. My mother lived at home then, but she had stayed the night at a friend's, and would never truly come to terms with why her life was saved by something as frivolous as a sorority dance. She was plagued ever after with the unshakable, guilty belief that she could have saved them if she had been home. She dreamed of them so often that she began to wish that she had died with them, instead of being left alone in that empty house, with all her memories, with the vague, nagging fear that the world was a creature not to be trusted, and that love was a burden too heavy to bare.

Nine months later she met my father, Calvin Carter, and he tempted her to dream other dreams.



My father came from a large Virginia family, a family very familiar with the rituals of burying the dead. I first met them on the day of his funeral. They entered the church in one long procession that flowed down the center aisle. Their faces were like masks carved by the pace and toil of farm life. Their individual appearances differed from one to the next- from basketball tall to stooped and stunted, from black as Africa to a white so light it looked unhealthy, from dignity of posture to the shifty eyes of a man thirsting for a whiskey. They walked by and paused up by the front of the church, gazing down into that box ringed with flowers.

I sat in the second row, beside my cousin, Michael. We were both uncomfortable, dressed in heavy suits, lulled almost to sleep by the slow, dank music that seeped from the walls and blended right into the hushed, somber voices that everyone spoke with. A heavy scents of flowers, colognes, and powders hung in the air like some floral tranquilizer. Michael shifted in his seat every few moments, brushing his shoulder against mine as if making sure that I shared his discomfort with him. He was three years older than me, and, at that age, three years was enough to give him the wisdom of an elder in my eyes. At some point, he leaned toward and asked, in a whisper, "Are you sad?"

"Sad?"

He bent in a little closer, holding his large, black-framed glasses to his nose with a finger. "Are you gonna' cry?"

"No."

"Yes, you are." He reached over and turned my face toward his. "See, your eyes are red. You're getting ready to."

I pulled away. "Naw-uh."

"Yes, you are." Michael leaned back and crossed his arms. "Just wait, man. You're gonna' be bawling."

"Naw-uh," I said. I made a show of turning away, and my gaze drifted toward the front of the church, searched through the maze of people till they found my mother. She stood over by the side entrance, with an upright posture, in a tight, black dress that constrained her torso. Her hair, instead of her usual wispy-blown look, clung to her head like a bathing cap. She spoke quietly to the people who approached her, nodding and

opening her arms to receive their embraces. It seemed that she had been up there forever. If it hadn't been for the strangeness of the atmosphere I might have risked calling to her.

Instead, I looked down to my lap, where I held a folded piece of paper with my father's picture on the front, a faded black and white photograph, hazy around the edges as if he were being engulfed by mist. I slid my fingers over the image and a question, long formed in my mind, escaped from my thoughts before I knew I had spoken it.

"What does it mean, *he's dead*?"

Michael couldn't help chuckling. "You ain't the brightest," he said, mimicking a phrase of his mother's. "Dead means he's gone to heaven. Didn't you ever see anything die before? Have you ever had a fish?" I shook my head. "Okay, you ever seen something, like a dog, hit by a car? Or something like that."

Several images flashed through my mind. Yes, I did remember a highway. Red breaklights shining. We slowed down and, yes, there was a crumpled form at the edge of the road. But my eyes had only lingered there for a moment because there was another dog, pacing on the other side of the road, just starting to step into the traffic. And even though it was just a second in motion, I had seen some great pain on the dog's face. *He's sad about his friend*, Momma had said.

"Once," I said, but my expression must have encouraged Michael to continue.

"Yeah, sure. Ever swat a fly?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then. When you swat a fly it's dead." Michael swatted my leg. "Except it doesn't go to heaven. That's just for people."

"Oh." It all seemed so simple to him. I looked at his palms. If I understood this

correctly, Michael was telling me... "He gets squashed."

"Yeah." Michael nudged my shoulder. "Squashed and dead are the same."

"Tony?" Momma stood in the aisle motioning for me to come to her. "Come on, honey, let's see your father."

I knew that the box up front somehow contained Daddy. But walking toward it I couldn't quite imagine what I'd find inside. My legs were heavy, unwieldy, as if my feet, with a mind of their own, wanted to slow my progress. The box was blue gray, a color like far away fog, and it shone with a brilliant newness. It reflected streaks of yellow light from the ceiling lamps and streaks of red from the floor's tight-woven rug. At the rim lay a ruffled cloth, just barely lapping over the edge.

I touched the rim of the box with my chest and finally saw Daddy. He wore a suit of black, with a crisp white shirt. His tie had a pattern like many falling raindrops, on which my eyes lingered for a long moment, only slowly, reluctantly, sliding up towards his clean shaven chin. His full lips were closed tightly together. His nose was still and his eyelids were closed in sleep. His whole face, even his dark, dark brown skin, had a pale tint to it and a strange stillness that I couldn't figure out.

His sleep seemed so fragile that for a moment I believed I could wake him if I reached forward and gently touched him on the cheek. I could wake him, for surely he would want to be awake with all these people around. My fingers actually rose from the rim of the box, but as my hand moved forward Momma' stopped it. She touched a single finger to my wrist. I froze and looked up at her.

Her face showed no more emotion than my father's. She met my eyes, and stared into them with a tired, almost dispassionate mourning, and even though she gave me no

visible sign, I knew I had to lower my hand back to the coffin rim. I didn't understand this dead that had overcome Daddy with sleep- and perhaps Momma's eyes simply told me that she didn't either- but I knew that it was not my place to wake him.

"Come. You need to say hello to your grandmother," Momma said. She pulled me gently away, and led me over to the front row of pews, where a line of older people sat. As we walked down the line, Momma introduced me to them. I shook hands and said hello, but could barely lift my eyes from the level of their knees. It wasn't until we reached the end of the aisle that I really felt a need to look up, as if some magnet were pulling on me.

First, I noticed the large man I knew to be my uncle, Jefferson, my father's oldest brother, whom I had met only once before. My eyes fixed for a second on his gnarled fingers, which rested folded at his waist. But the magnet was not this man. It was the woman just beside him, my grandmother, Mrs. Cordelia Carter. I vaguely understood that she was Daddy's mother, although the concept seemed odd. How could someone so old be a mother?

In some ways her frame seemed fragile- the lumps of her shoulders, the folds of skin around her neck, her arms thin like those of the Apple-head boy; but in other ways she conveyed some formidable sort of strength- her erect posture, the sharp protrusion of her chin, the tight grip of her fingers on a handkerchief, as if she were trying to squeeze the life out of it. Her face was partially shielded by a black veil, but I could see her eyes piercing the lace, meeting my gaze with a candor unlike that of most adults.

"Tony, say hello to Gramma Carter," Momma said.

"Hello, Gramma Carter."

The woman was silent for a moment, watching me. Then she turned toward Jefferson. "Jefferson, how long was the drive from South Hill?"

"Momma?..." Jefferson leaned down closer to her ear. "Joyce has-"

She cut him off with a click of her tongue. "I said, *how long was the drive here from South Hill?*"

Jefferson inhaled a deep breath. "I took us a little over five hours, Momma. But-

"Five hours," the old woman repeated. She puckered her lips as if considering the number carefully. "Five hours. Wasn't long at all, was it, Eva?" She turned to the woman on the other side of her.

Eva nodded. She looked about the same age as my grandmother, but her body was one of soft, round weight, with a large bosom that strained the buttons of her blouse, and a face built mostly of thick shapes. She was clearly following the conversation, but her eyes stayed fixed on something at the front of the church. "Didn't even feel like that much."

"Umhum," Gramma Carter said. "Not much a distance at all. But still my son couldn't see fit to come and take the time out to visit. That seem right to you?"

Eva shook her head.

"Mrs. Carter..." Momma began, but hesitated. I looked up at her, alarmed by the trembling tone of her voice. "You don't know how close we came. We were on the way. It was eating Calvin up, not seeing you. He never forgave himself for the way he left. If this hadn't happened..."

Gramma Carter let her eyes drift up to Momma's face. She stared at her for a long

moment, but directed her question at her friend. "Eva, you know what year my oldest son died? Nineteen hundred and sixty one. He was twenty two years old, killed one night out in a field by some white boys."

"Momma." Jefferson squeezed her shoulders.

"And do you know what year my daughter died? My only daughter. Nineteen hundred and forty. Died on birth. And then, of course my third son died in nineteen hundred and seventy four." She looked down at me. "You know my third son? You used to call him Daddy."

"Mrs. Carter," Momma said, "I understand that-"

"What do you understand?" Gramma Carter snapped. Her words suddenly came with a force that ruffled the veil. "You ever lose a child? You ever have a child leave you like that? Well?"

Momma shifted her jaw. She held the woman's gaze for a moment, but then her eyes slid uneasily down toward the floor. I could feel her hands trembling where they gripped my shoulders. "That's not fair. I've lost my husband."

Gramma' Carter scowled. She looked up at Jefferson. "Tell this woman to leave me in peace. Tell her to wait till the day she buries a son. I'll talk to her then, but not before." She turned her face away from Momma, with a finality that left everyone speechless.

Momma never did get to talk to Gramma Carter again. Neither did I. That was the first and last time I ever saw her in person. And that was fine with me. Where her anger came from and why she turned it on Momma was as unknown to me as the life of my father. But, like all of us, she had her reasons, as I eventually came to understand.



Later that afternoon I stood outside in front of the church. A frigid wind blew leaves across the sidewalk and nipped at my ears. I shoved my hands deep into my pockets, but the cold still nibbled at my wrists. A row of parked cars lined the busy street, lead by a large, black hearse, an ancient thing, with rounded edges and bright chrome fixtures that glinted with the strong light of the sun. Daddy's casket had been placed within it. I knew that the car was purring in preparation for some long journey, but the name I had heard mentioned, Sweet Breeze, only conjured the hazy image of a lone man facing a seabreeze on some ill-defined shoreline, an image pulled from a postcard hanging on the refrigerator at home. Sweet Breeze, it was a place that meant nothing to me, but that meant so much to my father's family.

It's hard to tell whether they're tied to that land by their love of it, or by the shared pain it's caused them. It seems that everyone in that line of my family lived with hardship always within sight. From what I understand, Gramma Carter's life may have been no worse than her mother's before her, but it's full of the type of trials that plagued the family. As she always reminded people, she lost her first child, her only baby girl, just after birth. She watched her husband concentrate his full resources on drinking, womanizing and escaping death by the narrowest of margins. Once he fell off the roof of a barn and impaled himself through the side on a fence post. Another time he drove his truck through the front porch of a neighbor's house. In neither case did his wounds encourage him to change his ways. Strangely enough, when he died it was fairly peaceful. He just turned up dead one afternoon sitting at the kitchen table. A heart attack, apparently. It wasn't long after that her second son, Marshall, followed him to the

grave. But this time not so peacefully. He died in true Southern style, stripped nearly naked, lashed with a horsewhip and eventually shot through the head. His killers were never found. I'm not even sure that they were ever looked for. And then, before he was cold in the ground, my father fled that place and headed north, although he only got as far as D. C.. Somehow, it seemed, this abandonment was something Gramma Carter wouldn't forgive. Rather a dead son buried at home, or an alcoholic husband, then a son who flees for something else.

So that's the way it went down there at Sweet Breeze. And that was where my father was off to, to that rich soul, so nourished by blood. But I, at that moment, was more concerned with the cold, and with the sudden suspicion that my mother might have left me behind. I walked away from the hearse and pushed through the crowd, searching for the red trim of my mother's black coat.

A firm hand stopped me. I looked up into the face of my Uncle Jefferson. He looked almost nothing like Daddy. His features were bulky and deeply cut in his chestnut flesh. His forehead was a wide expanse, almost smooth of wrinkles that slid far up into his thinning hair. "Hey, son, where you off to?"

I shrugged. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Jefferson sucked in his cheeks. "What kind of answer is that? You can't be off to nothing. You can be up to nothing, but not off to nothing. That don't make too much sense, seems to me."

I shrugged again. "Looking for my mom."

"Oh." Jefferson stood up and scanned the crowd. "Joyce! Hey, Joyce! I got somebody here who's looking for you."

Almost immediately Momma appeared. "Oh," she said. "Tony, I thought you were gonna' wait by the door."

"Yeah, but-" I began, but stopped when she spoke.

"You all going to have enough time to get everything taken care of today?" she asked Jefferson. Although she addressed him politely enough, there was a tension that caused the edges of her cheeks to tremble.

"Sure, long as we don't take too long getting out of here. Joyce, I-" Jefferson paused. He looked down at his hands and wrung them together, with motions that seemed childlike. He looked, for a few moments, just like an enormous version of nervous boy. But the illusion vanished with the deep cadence of his voice. "Joyce, you know she don't mean nothing by it, don't you?"

Momma looked away as if something had just caught her eye. "No, I wouldn't say that. She meant something by it. I'd say that was the point and she made it clear."

"Joyce, she's just got different ways of grieving is all. Momma grieves by getting angry at someone, but it always passes. It's just her way."

I frowned, confused for a moment about who this other *Momma* was. "Who you talking-"

"Old folks got their ways," Jefferson said, softly. "A mother's not supposed to see her children die. Now Momma has seen two of her boys and her baby girl lying in the ground. She'd be different if her life had been different." He reached down and put a hand on my head. "Look, son. You ever find the inclination to, you can come down and hang about South Hill. We'll teach ya' how to eat chitluns. Ya' hear? We don't forget family down that way, even all things considered." He looked up at Momma. "I'm

serious, Joyce. You know he's welcome. It's a good place to be raised, place to teach you how to be the right kind of man. Momma's a hard woman in a lot of ways, but she was a good mother. Raised up a good son in Calvin, didn't she? Maybe better than she even wanted. She's the one that taught him to care about the important stuff in this world. She loved him too much, is the problem, and too much happened in her life not to make her harden up a bit. But it wouldn't take much time at all for this young fellah right here to soften her up."

Momma nodded. Her face kept its tense expression, but her voice was a bit softer when she spoke. "Thanks, Jefferson. We'll keep it in mind."

Jefferson took a step closer to her and grasped her hand in his. "And don't let any of this fuss with Momma' foul your memory of Calvin. You know you two was something special. I know it's hard now, but remember the good."

"Yeah. I'm trying."

Jefferson turned and made eye contact with the man standing beside the hearse. "Well listen, I suppose we best move on. Still got miles to cover 'fore Calvin can rest. How's that poem go? 'Miles to go before I sleep?' Yeah. 'Miles to go before I sleep...' It is sleep, Joyce- a beautiful sleep." Jefferson backed away and began helping some of the older folks into the cars.

I pulled on Momma's sleeve. "We not going with them?"

"Naw, honey. They're doing their own thing. They got their own way about them. But we'll go to Aunt Maxine's and get some food. Are you hungry?"

I nodded. "What's chit-lines?"

Momma laughed. "You don't want to know. Don't ask, baby. Sometimes it's

better not to know." She raised her gaze, and we both watched as the hearse pulled cautiously away from the curb. The cars following seemed reluctant. They moved in fits and starts, until they finally fell in line behind the hearse, which pulled them down the city street toward home, like the head of some great serpent.