



DAWN

Sonny was sweeping up the Starlight when Dawn floated into the empty bar. "Be right witch a honey," Sonny said as he pinched his nose and tossed some sawdust onto the vomit in the women's stall. Dawn danced around, like dust in the early morning light, until Sonny finished.

"My you shore a sight fo' sore eyes, Miz Dawn," Sonny said, wiping the sawdust on his Osh Kosh B'Gosh bib overalls.

"Marry me Sonny," Dawn said, "make an honest woman outta me.

"Ah'd like that right good, Miz Dawn, but'cha all know 'ats agin the law. Why we'd both be outlaws then."

"We already are Sonny."

"Giss yer right there," Sonny said, blushing burnt umber and shuffling his feet.

Dawn and Sonny have performed this routine with endless variety. It was not a fantasy so much as a form of play. Sonny was sixty-some, five foot-six, black as a briquette and skinny as sin. Dawn was fifteen, five foot-ten, white as a Wisconsin winter and built like God once knew what it

was doing.

Sonny slapped Dawn's outstretched palm and Dawn pocketed a packet of Devil Dust. Then she paid him in the back booth, the best way she knew how. And Sonny smiled, fully satisfied with the day just begun.

"The best things in life are free," Sonny said, buttoning the strap on his bib overall.

"Yeah," Dawn agreed, "but a bottle of Dewars costs twenty bucks and nickel bags are shrinking."

"I hear ya. How you doin' otherwise, honey?"

"There don't seem to be any other ways, Sonny."

"Know whatcha mean, Miz Dawn. Whyn't you high outta here? Why yer so purty – an yer Mama too."

Ma's gettin' old, Sonny – where'd we go? I don't know nobody 'cept Johns and cons."

"Why hell Dawn, getcher se'f one a them rich galboys. They always need pretty bait like yew to 'tract new fish. You show'em the light, honey. Why you could see-duce the Pope hers'f."

"Ha! Good old Sonny. What would I do without you?"

"Reckon you find out one a these days. Do yerse'f a deed an' get off'n 'at speed."

"Maybe I will, honey. So long – see you t'morrow?"

"Not if'n yer lucky Miz Dawn.

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Ripe at fifteen, Dawn was getting bruised. Tired of being gifted and groped by greedy old and young men. Men of thirty or fifty with fructuous wives in the country and rotten kids in private schools. Men who had it all yet wanted something on the side. Always something on the side.

Dawn dusted her mind and drifted, drawing the drapes against the light of day. Mama came and went, said things, Dawn responded, she imagined, but couldn't say for sure. Mama must be okey, Dawn murmured to herself, as Mama left again.

Mama was okey but over thirty now and she had been trying the bars again to pay for Dawn's photographer fees and taxi rides to auditions. Dawn rather knows what Mama does. Mama has boyfriends until she finds a man. Mama's had dozens and one of them is Dawn's Daddy. It may be one or maybe the other of twin brothers but both are now long gone. One is in Taos and the other is somewhere in Marin County. Tad and Tod, Mama calls them Tit and Tat Rat.

Mama's name is Madge (Magic Madge to some) and she was seventeen, growing up in Grosse Point, Michigan, when she noticed something else growing on her. It wasn't much at first; a faint unease in the morning, a loss of appetite before a binge. Then Mama became euphoric. When a second full moon passed without a visit from 'her friend', she went a little looney.

Mama hit Daddy Bucks for travel money, insisting it was a good idea. And the old man, having already heard the rumors around the factory, signed a large check. "Don't expect to hear from you or your's again Madge. I hear tell there's already one or two on the assembly line staking claim to be the next Chairman of the Board."

"Okey-dokey, Daddy Bucks," Madge said, with preternatural bravura. "As long as the checks don't bounce, it'll be Iacocca."

"Thy will be done," Daddy Bucks said.

The money came and went for a few years and then Mama's checks started bouncing and didn't stop. She placed a call to Daddy Bucks – got his attorney and the bad news. Mama went to the library on 42nd street, found a back issue of The Detroit Free Press, and read a four column obituary. Mama said, "Bye Daddy," walked out of the library, past the lions, scooped up Dawn (who she had left on the steps to play with a baglady) and went about her business.

Which was?

One month, Mama was personal assistant to Ahmad Melehi, Attache to the Vice-Consul from Addis Ababa. Mostly, she did Ahmad

while listening to him talk to his wives on the phone. Another year, she supervised the household staff of a romance novelist (famous for her ubiquitous scenes of sodomy and anal rape and intimations of incest) in a triplex high in the sky above the United Nations; the same building which once housed such demi-luminaries as Johnny Carson, Truman Capote, David Suskind, all of whom Mama heard mentioned by the domestic help. Mama didn't know or care who any of these men were, though one day, a man claiming to be a former Governor came into Mama's office and wanted to do the same in Mama's mouth. Mama said, "No, thank you!" The governor reported Mama to his friend the author and the author said, "Go!" And Mama went without a whimper.

Since those days, its been up and down but never too far in either direction. Mama has never missed much, least of all a meal. Once she told Dawn she did miss Tad or Tod but Dawn couldn't remember which. Mama had been in love with one but was going to marry the other because he would. Then Tad or Tod pulled a switch and next thing Mama knew they were both gone. Each chipped in half and sent it to Mama in a telegram telling Mama to 'cut the cord'. But Mama wouldn't, couldn't, didn't.

Dawn still blessed Mama for that but sometimes began to wonder why? Deep doubts, like budding breasts and bloody mornings, mysterious meandering crevasses were closing in on Dawn.

Puberty passed. Dawn had never been a happy child but neither was she sad. She didn't know why some people seemed to have so much fun, yet she never felt like she was missing anything. Mama would say, "Come on Dawn – it'll be fun." And Dawn would say, "Okey.

Mama would say, "See – isn't this fun?" And Dawn would say, "Sure Mama.

Somehow, she and Mama never got ahead yet never thought they were behind. They spent everything they had, sometimes before they had it. Mama's theory was: "Better spend it now – we may never get it."

Some years there was credit and some years there were food

stamps. "Money is money," Mama said. "It doesn't matter where it comes from if someone will give it to you. But Dawn, honey," Mama said, 'Don't you ever steal.'" And Dawn didn't. Didn't need to. People seemed to want to give her things.

*

One sunny day, it quickly clouded over and turned bitter cold. Dawn saw a thick white Icelandic sweater in a window on Bleecker Street. Dawn said, "Brrrrrrr," and bopped into the boutique. "How much's that beautiful sweater in the window?" she asked the bug-eyed boy behind the counter.

"It'd look great on you, Mama," the boy said, cupping his balls in one hand and hanging on.

"How much and I ain't your Mama?" Dawn said, knowing she had about three bucks in her back pocket.

"Not much – five minutes inna back room," the boy said, nudging his nuts a little. "Two minutes if yer as good as you look."

"How's that?" Dawn, the ingenue, asked.

The boy made a vulgar motion with his mouth and Dawn laughed.

"C'mon – it'll be fun," the boy said, already unfastening his Motley Crue belt buckle.

And so Dawn did. It wasn't really fun but it didn't hurt and her new sweater felt sooooo good. Later, she often bought things in the same manner. Mama never asked how she came by what she had or if she needed any money. Both she and Dawn left their cash and keys laying around on whatever table was closest to the door in whatever apartment they happened to be living.

Dawn didn't sleep much; only a few hours every few days. She ate whatever came her way. She'd eat a single piece of Sushi one day and the next time she might start to vomit at the thought of raw fish and want kielbasa. For all this she was seldom sleepy or hungry. She bathed twice a day; couldn't stand her own odor and refused to wear perfume. She thought it was merely another form of air pollution. Someone did her

laundry but it never occurred to her to ask who. Mama had it done. That's what Mamas were for, Mama thought. If Dawn's closet became empty, she would procure more clothes and Mama would throw out the ones she didn't like or those she didn't think her baby should wear. Dawn didn't care. She never became attached to a particular well-worn pair of jeans or a special t-shirt given to her by a special boyfriend. Dawn had no special boy friends. She had too many to choose from and not enough time.

Men and boys came and went and paid all the checks or it was goodbye Tom. Dawn never called a man and often agreed to dates she had no intention to keep. The boys and men seemed not to mind or if they did it was so long Dick. A man who had once shared her favors had no guarantee he would share them a second time. A few had thought to demand as much or tried to force themselves on her. In which case Dawn would challenge them. She would bet them money they couldn't get it up. She had never lost that bet and thus it was goodbye Harry.

No man had what Dawn wanted because Dawn didn't know what, or if, she wanted anything. She always simply got what she needed; sometimes more.

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Like everyone, Dawn had been using drugs even before she knew it. Codeine Tylenol when she was teething. Valium when she was five and frantic, living on potato chips and ketchup and orange juice. Triaminic and Actifed when she had colds. Aspirin when she had a fever.

"Being sick is just a bunch of symptoms," Mama insisted. "Change the symptoms and the sickness is gone." Dawn just nodded. "If you feel bad doin' what you're doin', do somethin' else. See if you don't feel better."

Mama wasn't all negatives. She also showed Dawn how much better orange slices tasted next to chocolate. "Sweet and sour," Mama would say as she sipped her Margarita and Dawn slurped her Shirley Temple. "Works every time."

Sometimes it seemed Mama had been everywhere, done every thing.

Mama once said, "Child – there ain't no place to go without yourself. So there ain't no sense in moving unless you have to. You don't just up'n move to Taos unless Taos is part of you." Dawn nodded, even though she could tell Mama was talking to herself.

Some short time later, Dawn answered the phone and the operator said, "I have a collect call from Tad (or Tod) in Taos. Will you accept the charges?"

Dawn replied, "No – there ain't nothin' in Taos." Mama was not home at the time and Dawn forgot to mention the call.

*

Deep in the Devil Dust daze, Dawn dreamt she was waking up. Then she was making coffee in the dark. The coffee was florescent white as it flowed into the cup. Next she was putting on her tiny bit of makeup as she looked out at the cold and rainy night. It was not a good night to go out, so she finished her coffee and went back to bed to finish her dream.

When Dawn awoke, it was dark. She made coffee and went to the bathroom. She took a bath and swallowed a little black and yellow capsule. She drank her coffee as her short, boyish hair dried in the breeze from the open window.

"Hello me," she said, laughing at the rising sun. She heard the key in the door. Mama came in and started yammering, "Dawn honey, I got good news. I got me a man who wants me to meet him in Mexico. He gave me a ticket and everything. See?"

Dawn poured a fresh cup of coffee and turned to face Mama. Mama, seemingly slow and slurry said, "Wha'd'ya think Sweetie?"

"Bout what Mama?"

"Mexico?"

"Is Mexico married?"

"Well – yaaaaaah – buuuuut..."

"Yeah – but – sheeee-it" Dawn said. A precocious cynicism had taken residence in Dawn's soul.

Mama, now the naive one, replied, "He's leaving his wife.

"Leaving her behind you mean."

"Yeah – maybe – but – ..."

"Maybe but hell Mama!"

Mama looked down at her tiny, well-shaped feet. How long, she tried to recall, since they had been tan? Ten years? At least.

"So – you're going?" Dawn knew she was.

"What I got to lose?" Mama's grin was infectious. Dawn's medication was losing its initial buzz and she was losing track of what had transpired so she shrugged. Mama stood on tip-toes and kissed Dawn on her aquiline nose. "You're a good daughter, darlin'."

"Thanks Mama – I love you too. How long?"

"How long what?"

"You gonna be gone?"

Spiro says weeks but..." Mama paused. "I'm kinda hopin'."

"You love'im Mama?"

"Hell no! That's why he's perfect. If he goes back to his wife, I won't give a damn. I still get a great vacation."

That made some sense, so Dawn helped Mama pack.

*

"It's me – Dawn," Dawn yelled into the dimly lit bar.

"Be right witch a honey."

Dawn went behind the bar and poured a straight shot of Dewars and removed a tiny pink tablet from the midst of all the yellow ones. There were also a few with 714 stamped on them and then some of her favorites: those little yellow jackets. She placed the pink tablet on her lavender tongue, chucked her chin and tossed down the Dewars as Sonny came out rolling his bucket and mop.

"Mornin' Dawn. Yew look fresh as dew on a daisy."

"Kinda in a hurry, Sweetness," Dawn said, nervously. She didn't

know why or where she was hurrying to; just couldn't seem to stand still for too long.

"Sure thing honey," Sonny said, pulling a packet from the inside brim of his Yankees hat. (His Yankees hat was his pride – original fitted felt instead of one of those new fangled adjustable ones in polyester – it was given to him by Elston Howard, years ago.) "We'll just skip the amenities this mornin' – seein' as how the bags is shrinkin' as you say."

"That's not what I meant, Sonny. You know..."

"Naw – I know ya didn't honey. I'm hurryin' too this mornin'. M'boy got hisse'f busted – gotta get down to The Man. Ya know what ah'm sayin'?"

"Yeah – you need any cash money?"

"Naw – My Man will take care a The Man."

"Gotcha!" Dawn kissed Sonny on the cheek and walked out. Sonny loved to watch her from behind – sweet mother hips – and the way she swung her purse like she was silently listening to Ron Carter backing Miles. "Dawn – you shore do shake yo' booty," Sonny said.

Dawn threw an extra spectacular bump back his way, then kept shaking it down the street and into another day.

*

Sonny's boy had many names. Sonny called him Junior. Junior's mother called him George Washington. His pals around Washington Square called him The Prez or The Keeper. And when he was in the slammer his inmates all called him The Key. This last moniker was the one Junior preferred. The Key had been locked up more times than he or anyone else could remember, and yet, he had never spent two consecutive nights in jail.

Each time he got busted, The Key made his call. Sonny answered, called his man and George Washington Carter Davis Jr. walked out a free man. And furthermore, each time he was busted, his blotter was somehow pure as driven snow. Each Judge looked him over and knew he'd seen this

particular 'perp' many times before. Yet somehow, each Judge mistrusted his own memory in favor of the clean slate before him.

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Half way down the block, Dawn stopped in her tracks, backed up three or four paces and paused. A look of confusion crossed her face and she went forward again. She had been headed somewhere but forgot just where it was. A few hours later, as she was looking in the window of a Christian Science Reading Room (All Are Welcome, the sign said), it came back to her. Hands! Beautiful Hands. Dawn looked at her own hands and the image of a diamond ring being slipped on the appropriate finger crossed her mind. She rummaged through her purse and found an appointment card. 10:30 – 48th & Mad. Hands!

Dawn looked at the clock above the librarian's desk and said, "Shee-it!" The librarian looked up, as if she had heard, removed her glasses, primped a bit and motioned for Dawn to come in. Dawn teased a little smile and walked away, straight backed with no side-ways motion. She fingered her wallet out of her purse as she walked, looked inside and counted a number of Jacksons and a couple of Franklins. 'Mama,' she thought, 'how you doin' down there? How's Spiro holdin' up?' She stopped at a streetside postcard rack, picked one out, then realized she didn't know exactly where in Mexico Mama was. She replaced the card, went into the store and had her face digitized onto a t-shirt. "You got a dressing room?" she asked the plain, plumpish young girl behind the camera.

"Just the john – and that's 'pose ta be for employees only."

"Oh well," Dawn said.

"I could go in with you – I s'pose," the girl said, blushing.

"Never mind," Dawn said, stripping off her silk blouse, turning it inside out and using it to wipe the sweat from her un-shaved armpits. Before the salesclerk could get a good look at Dawn's pert and perfect breasts, the t-shirt was on and Dawn was out the door, leaving her blouse

behind. The clerk picked it up, looked around the store, then slowly smelled Dawn's aroma before putting the slightly damp armpit into her mouth. "Come agin'," the girl mumbled into the blouse, then realized she had forgotten to collect the seven bucks. Dawn remembered and walked backwards into the boutique.

"It's okey," the clerk said. "Maybe I kin jus' keep this."

"Why not," Dawn said and beat the retreat.

*

A couple of blocks from the Starlight, Sonny came running up the street, one strap of his bib overall flying in the breeze. Junior was one block behind and closing. Dawn stopped to chat but Sonny ran right past without seeming to notice her. Junior yelled at Dawn as he passed by, "Hey white witch – where'd Old Tom go?"

"How'd I know?" Dawn replied. "You seen one spade you seen 'em all."

"Right – I'll deal with you later, jail-bait."

"Sure thing, crow-bait," Dawn said, then nervously laughed. As she continued on her way, Dawn began to feel bad about what she'd called Junior. It just slipped but that was no excuse. She recalled Sonny playing some tune for Dawn as they made their daily exchange.

"It's called Strange Fruit, honey," Sonny said. "It's a lowdown, sad and rotten song but somehow when my Lady sings it – it makes you feel like maybe things is gettin' better. Then agin' – somedays, like t'day – I just don't know."

The refrain echoed in Dawn's mind as she walked home: for the crows to pluck... wind suck... black buck... bodies hanging...

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Later that night, the phone was dead when Dawn tried to call Little Szechuan for some sesame noodles and Scampi Sung Wun Sa.

"Damn!" Dawn said, wondering how long it had been out. She

couldn't remember who had last called her but knew she hadn't called anyone since the last time she had a craving for scampi. And when was that? Way before Mama went to Mexico. 'How ya doin', Mama?' she wanted to ask. 'What's with the phone?' And that made her miss Mama all the more. Half her day was now spent wondering when Mama would be coming back, the other half was wasted worrying if she was okay.

Dawn's birthday was coming up. Number sixteen and Mama had never missed one. Dawn put the kettle on the stove but the stove didn't light. She lit a match and still it wouldn't flame. "Damn!" Dawn said. "Shit Mama! Come on home!"

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What Dawn did next might have looked heavenly but in fact would have been sheer hell for a man to witness. Dawn disrobed in the middle of the kitchen, went into the bathroom, bent over the tub and turned on the faucet. She waited in that position for the steam to rise. And as she waited, she started a gentle rubbing of her soft blonde bush. Just a little brush with the back of her hand was enough to make Dawn shiver. She spread her chamois thighs and tipped one ruby-tinted toe into the tub. "Ooooh," Dawn squealed. "Damn – that's cold. Mama? What the hell ...?"

Dawn dressed, walked out into the night and into the Hotel Desdemonia down the block. The electric sign out front had lost a few letters so it now read: Hotel De-demon--.

"I need a bath," Dawn told the man picking his nose. "I mean – I need a room with a bath."

The clerk wiped his discovery on the leg of his yellow and green checked polyester trouser and said, "Sure babe. You're new – this gonna be cash or commission?"

"Whatever suits you – just gimme the key."

The clerk mistook her for just another splash from the Minnesota Pipeline. "Commission's fine with me. Who's yer rep?" He slid the key along Dawn's forearm, planted it in her palm, then took it back. "Second

floor, "he said. "After you."

Dawn walked ahead as the clerk enjoyed the wonderful little backbeat in her rumble seat. "Clyde's m'name," Clyde said. Dawn didn't respond. She knew it was information she would never need again.

"I'll need yer name babe – fer the laws."

"Ivy," Dawn said.

"Ivy what...?"

"Poison Ivy."

"Right. This all night or just an hour?"

"Half an hour. I told you – I just need a bath."

"No charge for that – if I kin watch babe," Clyde said hopefully, never quite expecting to win his point.

"Sure thing," Dawn said, "just remember the song."

"What song's that babe?"

"Poison Ivy. You can look – but you better not touch."

"I hear you loud and lean babe." Clyde said.

Clyde would have been better off not watching. The sight would haunt him all that night and into the next millennium. As for Dawn, she had her bath, used all the towels, pulled fresh cotton panties from a totebag, slipped into her white painter's pants and pink v-neck sweater, slipped out the door, down the block and back home to her own bed. Clyde stayed behind in the bathroom for a few minutes to do what he had to do.

Back home, Dawn took one whiff of her sheets and said, "Damn Mama! These sheets stink!" She got up, went to the closet, stood on tip-toes to reach the top shelf, but the shelf was as bare as her own little butt sticking out of her blue on white pin-stripe shirt. "How'n hell's a girl s'pose ta sleep on smelly sheets?" Dawn asked the empty closet.

As her safe little world shut down all around, Dawn popped two little yellow tabs. 'Two ought to do it,' Dawn thought. 'Oh hell – make it four. Better safe than sorry'. That was when the lights went out.

"Damn it!" Dawn said, "Maybe four was too many."

There was a knock at the door which Dawn either ignored or didn't hear. It was too close to call. The knocking continued as she stumbled into Mama's bed in the dark. Mama's sheets were nearly fresh but Dawn could detect the faint aroma of Chanel. More knocks, then a voice.

"You in there white meat – I seen you come in."

Dawn recognized the language, if not the voice. "Sonny tol' me come getchew. He needs yer he'p pussy."

That almost got to her. She'd do almost anything for Sonny – but Sonny would never call her pussy. Dawn was drifting. Little piles of yellow pellets kept her rolling around Mama's warm...warm...warm bed. The knocking stopped long before Dawn knew it. She thought she heard a scratching at the lock. 'Stupid ass,' she thought, 'door's probably not even locked. Go waaaaayyyy...'

*

The Starlight was locked tight the next morning when Dawn peeked in the window. She could see the familiar Reingold sign glowing over the bumper pool table, but no trace of Sonny.

"Where are you Sonny?" Dawn said, then heard her words vibrating back at her from the glass. Sonny had always been there. One of her earliest memories was of her and Mama walking by The Starlight – even before moving up to Chelsea – and Sonny came out and did a fancy softshoe routine. "Yeah baby – I usta could really move," he had said as he executed the moonwalk. "But a corse that was 'fore the arthuritis set in."

Fifteen minutes passed before she could pull her little button nose from the frosted glass. She sat down on the planter in front of the bar and didn't move for another half hour. When she saw Sonny limping up the street, looking over his shoulder every few feet, she raced to meet him.

"Oh Sonny," she said. "I dreamt you were dying and that boy a your's came for me to help you and I didn't cause I couldn't but I wanted to." Then she paused before saying, " And where the hell you been?"

"I been hidin'. Where'd you see Junior?"

"I didn't – I dreamt he was bangin' on my door but I didn't let him in cause you told me not to."

"Good fer you child." Sonny looked and sounded terrified.

"Ain't got nuthin' for ya t'day, darlin' Damn kid done stole mah whole stash."

"That's okey, Sonny. I'm just glad you're alive."

"That makes one of us, honey."

Dawn saw a bad look in Sonny's eyes; a look she'd never seen in anyone's eyes – least of all Sonny's. "Here," Dawn said, slipping something into Sonny's bib pocket. "You take my extra key – in case you need a hideout." Sonny nodded.

"Want me t'help ya with your chores, Sonny?"

"Naw Sweety – you go on about yer biz. You better stay away fer a lil' while – least til I git that lil' bastard back'n that slam where I shoulda lef' him in the firs' place."

Sonny unlocked the door, went in the bar, locked the door behind him and pulled the shades. Dawn stood staring at the Starlight. Then, for lack of anything better to do, she went home.

*

Dawn sat on the couch – having turned on the TV. After some time passed, noticing the TV remained silver and silent, she got up, turned it off and then back on again. "Shit Mama!" she said, then lay back down on the couch and turned to the wall. As quick as she did, she popped back up, threw the bolt on the door and returned to position. Hours later, she nodded off, then jerked awake again, got up and walked to the fridge for an orange. Inside there was brown and white cream flowing down the door and a puddle of water soaking the assorted moldering leftovers. "Nothing works anymore," Dawn whined.

The poor girl had never, in her whole short life, thought to question what made things go round, ring, get warm, or cold, or live, or die. All she now knew was: this world is falling apart. She wanted to run ask Sonny

what was going on, then remembered she couldn't. She picked up an orange, wiped the chocolate on a towel, took a bite and spit out the rind. She sucked the fruit dry while gazing out the window at the tar papered roofs below. On one roof, an overweight, unattractive woman was sunbathing with her halter down and above her an equally unattractive man was observing her with binoculars. On the next roof a couple of teenage boys were slouched against the tarpaper flashing, sniffing one paper sack and sucking from another. A siren screamed by and faded. A jet seemed to be headed for a crash into the World Trade Center, then disappeared and came out the other side. The smell of curry rose in a draft and was soon wasted by the diesel smell of a bus headed for Port Authority. Distantly, Dawn could hear the BMT and felt the building quiver. A pidgeon landed on her window sill, saw Dawn and flew away. Dawn felt like fleas were crawling up her arm and scratched a phantom itch. On the street below, a poodle's mistress stooped to pick up her master's offal with a pooper scooper, then walked to a pile of garbage bags and tossed it on top. Less than a minute passed before a rag-tag man came by, picked up the same little bundle, opened it, smelled it, shook his head and tossed it onto the windshield of a BMW. Dawn laughed, sucked her orange, then turned it inside out and scraped the shell with her perfect white teeth. The mail carrier crossed the street and Dawn rushed down to meet him.

"Better empty your box, Miss Pretty. Ain't no more room in there," the mailman said, handing Dawn a banded stack of mail. Dawn quickly shuffled through the stack, dropping the junk from ConEd and NYTel on the stairs as she walked back up. Then she came across a postcard with a picture of the Blessed Virgin flocked in fuzz and glitter. Our Lady of Grace was standing on the head of a snake. "Yuk," Dawn said, turning it over. "Oh boy!" she squealed. "Mama!

Dawn plopped on the stairs to read:

Dear Dawn Honey:

I'm so glad To be alive and lucky Too. I'm getTING OUT Today.
(Dawn felt her heart flutter and her pulse began to race.
Getting out? Out of where?) IT's been Two weeks BUT now
I'm on my way back home. Love Mama.

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Dawn was stricken as she shuffled through the rest of the mail until she came to another postcard. She didn't stop to register the picture – just flipped it over and read:

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Dawn Honey:

Don'T you worry now Darlin BUT old SpirokeeT beat The
beejeezuz OUT of me before he flew off To Manzanillo
with some Teenage bimbo he picked up The first day we
hit The beach. He said I could come along and we Three
could have a good Time BUT I Told him To biTe The big one.
ThaT's when he Threw his right cross. Woke up here
(Where? Dawn wanted to know) and The Doc says I'll be
okey. Love Mama.

*

On the other side of the card a sepia photograph of a house in Puerto Vallarta. Nothing else. Dawn couldn't tell if it was a hotel, a hospital or a jail. "Mama," Dawn moaned. "Where are you? What's takin' you so long to get home."

Tiny tears, like little seltzer bubbles, stung Dawn's eyes and clouded her vision. Someone came into the vestibule and yelled for Dawn to open the door. She stopped abruptly when she saw through the frosted glass that it was not Mama. Someone was leaning on all the buzzers at once.

"Come on you Honkies – open up. It's me – The Key."

The Key buzzed and buzzed as Dawn silently crept up the stairs, locked and bolted the door and went to the window. Down below, Junior

was walking down the steps. He looked up, got blinded by the sun's glare on a window and yelled. "Yo – ya gotta come out sometime, Witchy Bitch."

"C'mon home – Mama!" Dawn said, those tiny tears now welling up enough for one to slide slowly down her cheek and into the corner of her mouth. Dawn licked the saline. It tasted so right she waited, hoping another drop would follow the first. But it didn't. The next one dried half way down.

*

"I got me a prime piece of real estate lined up m'man." Junior was saying to one of his cronies in Washington Square. They were hanging out, trying to look inconspicuous amidst the chess players in the Southwest corner. Junior paused long enough to give the jerk-off to a tourbus going down McDougal.

"Thinkin' 'bout expandin' mah operation. Maybe gonna go into the trade."

"I hear ya," the crony replied, keeping one eye cocked for the undercovers.

A one-legged man, without crutches, bounded by, leaned against the fence, cranked out his humongous, uncircumsised, black sausage and pissed. Three feet away a pair of silver-haired matrons tried to pretend he didn't exist even though he loudly proclaimed, "I'm pissing here."

"Course I gotta p'suade the young lady to my way a thinkin' before it can come to full fruitashun. If ya know what ah'm sayin'." Junior held out his palm and the crony gave it the cool touch.

"This here little number is crystal pure, prime, nevah been bar-b-cork-screwed white meat. The old man's been s'plying her jones but I'm convincin' him ta sign her mortgage over to me."

"You be bad, Man. Cut me a chunk a that," the crony said.

"Later m'man," Junior said, walking towards the fountain to meet one of his regulars on a 10-speed; a professorial type with beard, wearing safari shorts who Junior knew was always good for a double dime.

*

After paying the Doctor, Mama was flat outta cash. She had a return ticket from Mexico City but that still left her stuck in Puerto Vallarta. She could be home in six hours and she wasn't really hungry, so that was no problem. But she had to get to the airport, (10-15 bucks) buy a ticket to Mexico City, (40 bucks) and pay the exit tax (4-5 bucks). Sixty-seventy bucks, Mama figured as she walked out of the hospital into the blood boiling sun.

Mama had never turned a trick in her life; never said, I'll do X if you give me \$. That sort of language was as foreign to her as the voices she now heard all around. She tried the phones again and again with no luck. The international operator sent back only a humming noise. The one time she did get through to New York, a message told her that her number had been disconnected. When the message began to repeat for the fifth or sixth time, Mama hung up. "Dawn honey – you okey?" Mama said to no one as she wandered down the streets and across the bridge. Down a flight of stairs, on the little island in the river, she found the Cafe Franzi. Mama sat down under a shade tree on the veranda and ordered a cappuccino before she remembered she was broke.

The fat, swishy waiter said something caustic in fractured English but Mama ignored him in favor of the wild songbirds in the eucalyptus. The waiter began to operate the espresso machine, then began to curse and carry on in Spanish. A beautiful blonde woman – either a well preserved fifty or a burnt-out forty – came over to Mama's table. "I'm so sorry, Senora," she said, "but the machine is sometimes difficult. Your coffee will be on the house – if we can get it working." Then she grew even more expansive. "In fact – tonight everything is on the house. My partner has just had her first child – a son, no less."

"Muchas gracias," Mama said, expending her spanish vocabulary. "In that case, may I look at the menu. It may be a long night." The forlorn look on Mama's face and the slump of her shoulders signaled something to

the proprietress.

"You look troubled. Are you lonely? My name is Annalina." Then she stopped and bit her tongue. "Please forgive me – I didn't mean to pry. Perhaps you're only a writer. We get alot of writers here."

Mama failed to comprehend the non-sequiters but did now grasp how pitiable her position was.

"Lonely?" Mama laughed. "No – I've never been lonely," Mama said, without a trace of pride. "I do miss my Dawn though."

"Who is Don?" Annalina asked with a woebegone look crossing her brow.

So Mama told Annalina all about her problem and Annalina nearly wept for joy. She fed Mama, began calling her Darling Madge, then later that night, took Mama home to her apartment overlooking the bay. They drank Tangueray martinis, giggled like schoolgirls, Annalina met Magic Madge, then went to bed. The next morning, nothing was said about what went on in that single, double bed. Annalina merely fed Madge huevos rancheros, drove her to the airport on her mo-ped, paid for her ticket and slipped some U.S. Currency into Madge's blouse pocket. Mama kissed Annalina and thanked her.

"You come back anytime, Madge," Annalina said. "And bring Dawn with you next time."

'Next time? 'Mama thought. 'No next time for me,' 'I'm stickin' close to home, here on out.'

"Sure," Mama said, "Thanks again, Angelina."

"Annalina," she softly corrected Mama and a sad wistful look wrinkled her brow.

*

"Your boy Junior's been stoppin' by – bangin' on my door," Dawn told Sonny. Sonny walked away, into the storeroom.

"You stay way from that boy," Sonny said. "That boy is dirty dirty. Not the kind for the likes a you, honey."

"I know that Sonny." I aint lettin' him in. He ain't got the key, does he?"

"The Key? Whatcha'll know 'bout the key?" Sonny stopped abruptly, as if he had already let something slip. "His key has always been me and The Man."

"I mean the key to my place."

"Phew!" Sonny spewed, then wiped his brow with a red bandana.

"Who is your man?" Dawn said. "D'ya think he could help find Mama?"

"Don't you never mind. M'man is worsen'n that boy a mine." Sonny was standing unusually straight-backed and rigid.

"I hear ya Poppa," Dawn said. And Sonny slumped. All she had to do was call him Poppa and he was putty. Then Dawn told him about Mama and how much she was worried. She finished by asking – almost pleading, "ain'tcha got nuthin' for me, Poppa?" I been so damn tired lately. Can't sleep at all."

Sonny slipped Dawn a couple packets from his personal stash, then looked down as if ashamed. "That's the last of it, Sweets. Ain't gonna have no more – no more." Sonny wanted to tell Dawn all about it but couldn't. First he had to take control again.

"Thanks honey. You're the best." Dawn refused to believe the well was running dry. Refused to believe that Poppa wouldn't answer when she called.

"Lock your doors, baby," Sonny called after her, shaking his head in time to Dawn's backbeat down the street. Then, seeing Junior heading his way, he yelled, "Run baby," and barred the door.

*

The fact that Mama had no luggage, only the clothes on her back, made the customs agent suspicious.

"So! You say you're from New York?"

"That's right," Mama said. "Where you from?"

"I'll ask the questions. I'll give you some numbers, you tell me the next one. Ready?"

"I s'pose," Mama said, wondering what the hell numbers had to do with anything.

"Thirty-three, forty-two, fifty-one, fifty-nine." The agent crossed his arms and waited smugly.

"Sixty-eight," Mama answered without a pause.

The agent was flabbergasted. "How'd you arrive at that?"

"It's the next stop on the IRT. I went to Hunter College for a few weeks – years ago."

The agent waved Mama through.

In the cab, headed for Manhattan, Mama felt such relief she began to cry.

"Hey! Lady!" the cabbie said, looking in the rearview mirror. "You start goin' nuts and I'll let you out right here on Van Wyck."

"I'm alright," Mama said, the laughter overcoming the tears. "Thanks for the welcome."

*

Dawn didn't see Junior duck into the alley; the same alley she turned into to roll a twenty and Hoover a little white dust. Junior was leaning casually against a Demsey dumpster when Dawn tossed back her head and sniffed the demon deep into her lungs.

"Dip in," Junior sang, "to the sea – of possibility."

Dawn looked to her side and caught the sleazy smirk on Junior's face. "You little rock'n roll nigger. So the old man's still keepin' yer score - huh baby?"

"What's it to you." Dawn drawled, tossing one foot over the other. She had already begun to drift a little and dance to the looney tunes jingling all around her. She felt like air and mercury sliding across silk.

"I wanna he'p with ya jones, Mama. I can float you and yo' Mama too." (Junior was cranked up too.) "You been driftin' below the tide for too

long. Why not let The Key unlock your dreams?"

"You got the wrong one twice. Mama ain't here and even if she was she don't do no shit. And Sonny says you're just a nigger an' ta stay away from you."

"Well! Sonny keep blowin' his mouth that old Tom ain't gonna see no more pussy. You don't care what's best for you maybe you think 'bout Sonny an' yo' Mama too." Junior began to rub Dawn's arm. His touch felt clammy – like plastic.

Dawn looked down. Junior was sliding a packet of brown powder, the size and shape of a ravioli, into the crook of her arm.

"What's that shit?"

"Yeah! This is real shit. Time you grew up, baby. That dust you been blowin' just gonna make you crazy. This here is the plain old truth an' I'm gonna give you all the knowledge you can take – an' then some."

Dawn began to back away from the slime. "Whatty you get outta all this?" Dawn said, playing for time, trying to figure her best way out.

"Me?" Junior took two steps one way, two steps back, pivoted and said, "You don't hav'ta worry 'bout me. I am The Keeper and The Key." With this Junior thought he'd won her over. He slid his hand down Dawn's midriff, and Dawn – like a field goal kicker – got him in the crotch with her stiletto boot. Junior went down and didn't get up. Dawn didn't even bother to walk fast. She looked over her shoulder long enough to see Junior twisted like a piece of licorice, rolling in the garbage. The packet of brown sugar was still stuck to her arm. She peeled it off – started to toss it into the gutter – then slipped it into her pocket.

*

"Wait here," Mama told the cabbie. "My Dawn will be down to pay you." Mama was out the cab door and up the steps.

"Hey! Wayda minute," the cabbie said, jumping out behind her. He caught Mama at the buzzer. "You ain't gettin' away that easy bitch."

Mama was buzzing and buzzing but no one responded.

"Uh huh," the cabbie said. "Deadbeat just like I figgered. Where's a cop?"

"I'm not a deadbeat. You'll get yer money. Just leave yer fuckin' meter running."

"Mama! Mama!"

Mama looked down the street to where Dawn was breaking into stride like a gazelle.

"Dawn! Honey!" Mama screamed. "See, I told ya you'd getcher money – ya jerk." Mama took off.

"Damn straight," the cabbie said, looking around for a witness to verify he was winning. He watched the two girls meet in the middle of the street.

"Dawn honey – god you had me worried silly."

"You worried? What about me?" Dawn slapped Mama on the butt. "Don't you ever do that again."

"Pay this lovely man, Dawn. And give him a teeny-tiny tip."

"How much?" Dawn asked the cabbie without taking her eyes off Mama.

"Twenty-six fifty," the cabbie said.

Dawn gave him twenty-seven. "Keep the change." Then, as he shrugged and got into the cab without thanking her, Dawn said, "Wait a minute! I plumb forgot yer tip." She slipped him the little ravioli.

"What's this?"

"Put some in yer thermos – it'll perk up yer coffee."

Dawn and Mama were hugging and swinging around as the cabbie pulled away shaking his head. "Crazy dykes," he said as another cab plowed into his left front fender. Mama and Dawn were so oblivious they missed the beginning of the fight.

"Wha'd you give him honey?" Mama said.

"Yeah, honey. Brown sugar. How you been Mama? God I missed you."

"Dawn – I couldn't begin to tell you..." Mama was saying as the two entered the lobby, looking from behind like a couple of schoolgirls.

When Mama saw the devastation in the apartment, she knew immediately what had happened. Though she couldn't blame Dawn, it frightened her how young her daughter was. In many ways, Mama had always felt herself the child. Dawn had not yet thought much about tomorrows and Mama was beginning to dwell on yesterday. "C'mon, honey," Mama said. "Let's go for Dim Sum."

*

The waiter at Little Szechuan gave Mama a familiar smile and signaled the kitchen to begin serving.

"Sit tight, baby," Mama said. "I got some calls to make. Gimme some quarters, you got any?" Mama went to the pay phone, dialed a number and screamed a little. Dawn heard Mama say, "You said you'd take care of it... I don't wanna hear any excuses... right we're gonna have breakfast... I know it's afternoon... you got an hour."

The waiter was passing with a tray when Mama returned; the flush in her cheeks was fading as she snatched a plate of shrimp balls and one of those egg-shaped crusted things. Dawn was pouring her tea. Mama took a shrimp ball and Dawn followed her example. "Ain't these wonderful?" Mama said and Dawn just nodded and looked at Mama with adoring eyes. "I'm so sick of re-fried beans I could like to puke."

"Dawn honey," Mama began, then stopped.

"What Mama?"

"Today's a new day. I wanna tell you something that took me thirty and some years to learn but I don't want you to waste half your life before you know it."

"What's that, Mama?"

"Men are disgusting."

"I know that," Dawn said, almost too quick to agree.

"A woman's gotta learn to do for herself."

"I know that Mama..."

"Hush – let me finish."

"I know – 'cept..." Dawn took on a pouty look

"Except what?"

"Except some of 'em. I mean Sonny's awful good to me."

"Sonny? Who's Sonny? Oh yeah – him." Mama seemed to accept Dawn's affection for Sonny, even though she had never talked to the man. "Little old black men aren't really what I would call men. They're more like women – if you know what I mean."

Dawn didn't know but she nodded and waited for Mama to finish.

"Shit!" Mama said.

"Mama!" Dawn was pleasantly shocked. Mama didn't often use such language.

"Lemme tell ya," Mama went on. "Yesterday or last night, whenever it was, I was dozing off on the plane and when I woke up I noticed the nice stewardess had covered me with a blanket. Sitting beside me was this man who must have gotten on in Mazatlan. I don't remember what he looked like but one of his hands was cupping my titty and the other one was under his blanket. I jabbed him in the ribs and the bastard whispered, "Doncha wanna join the mile high club?" I didn't know what the hell he was talkin' about but I tell you I gave him a look that made him stop pumpin' for a minute. But then he wiggled his tongue at me and went back to his plaything. I turned aside and went back to sleep. When I woke up in Mexico City, all that was left of him was a wet spot on his blanket..."

Mama paused but Dawn didn't know quite what to say. "And Dawn, honey? That's about as much as you can expect from most men."

Mama stopped as if that was that and said, "Check."

Dawn didn't know for sure if she agreed. All she knew was how good it felt to have Mama back. The waiter arrived. Mama threw a Jackson on the table and slid out of the booth.

*

The two of them, skipping down the street, was a sight to behold. Mama held her skirt just slightly above her knees and Dawn did her best to match her steps. Women looked at them as if to say, 'brazen hussies'. But most men took it for the treat it was; a break in the dour scenery of a grey drizzly New York day. A pure aesthetic experience.

A pair of Puerto Rican eyes were tracking Dawn's long legs striding along in her white leather mini skirt. A voice called out, perhaps the voice that went with the eyes

"Hey Mama! Le's you an' me g'married an' have some babies."

"He's talkin' to you, baby," Mama said, as if in a trance. "See what I mean?"

"He's just a jerk, Mama."

Back at the apartment, Mama stopped outside the door. There was a commotion going on inside. She turned back, thinking to get the super or better yet the police. Then she turned again with a foolhardy look on her face, thrust the key in the lock, then another key in the Fox lock and barged in. Half way down the hall, she recognized the familiar smarmy voices she listened to every day, every week at this time. The afternoon soaps were on as Mama walked casually into the living room dropping highheel after highheel then sliding out of her skirt.

"Turn off some of those lights," Mama said as she turned the volume down and plopped onto the couch. "Do you smell something funny?" Mama said, almost hypnotized as she flipped the channel to *As The World Turns*.

Dawn said, "No," turned out all the lights then came over and cuddled in next to Mama. "It's probably the exterminator."

"What's the exterminator?"

"That smell."

"Yeah," Mama said, sighing deeply.

They both fell asleep before *The Edge of Night* came on, wrapped in each other's arms like kittens. The sun was breaking through the drizzle,

leaving a trapezoid of light moving across their bodies. Mama and Dawn had skin so similar it was impossible to tell whose arm, whose leg, whose glimpse of thigh, whose breast was being caressed by the warm sun. And they slept and dreamt.

Mama dreamt that Dawn had won the part of a young schizophrenic on *The Edge of Night*. Mama didn't like the part when they dressed Dawn like a teenage boy. She preferred it when the other half came out and Dawn got to play *la belle dame sans merci*.

Dawn dreamt that Tad or Tod had come back and wanted to marry Mama after all. And furthermore, he wanted to be her father too. The part of the dream Dawn didn't understand, the part that seemed most real, was where Mama got the gun and why she shot Tad or Tod. Dawn tried to wake up when she saw Mama strapped in the gas chamber. The smell was awful, yet somehow soothing and seductive and Dawn succumbed to the deep and the dark.

*

Sonny began to miss Dawn after only a couple days. On the fourth day, he called once. No answer. On the fifth day, he called again. And again. And then at all hours of the day and night.

Finally, after a week or so, Sonny got a message saying the phone had been disconnected. When he hung up, he scratched his head and said, "Baby coulda least stopped by to say so long. Sure hope y'all got lucky Miz Dawn. Ah'm gonna get outta here too, one day. Yessir. Leave this old Starlight far behind. Yessiree bob!," Sonny said as he got out his bucket and mop.

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