

Uncertain Alchemy

3.

It was Smyrna with her skinny legs and a man's work shirt and pants who brought so much talk, so many questions. How long were Vernita and Doris going to tend to this woman? How did they know she wasn't on the lam? What if someone came and said the sisters kidnapped this woman? Then all three aunties would turn their gaze toward her, not saying anything more.

She didn't have it in her to answer their questions. She didn't have any words to say.

The aunties took to calling her Quiet. She ate small portions of what they gave her, she wore the clothing, cleaned and mended, they put at the foot of the bed, she washed at the basin on the back porch.

Other people sometimes stopped by. When they did Doris found things for Quiet to do away from the house.

"Why are you taking in a white woman you don't know? She didn't even come with groceries" said one of their sons as he dropped and stacked a load of firewood.

"You came at lunchtime yourself" said Doris.

He went to his truck, returned with an elk haunch wrapped in canvas. Vernita stood nearby as Doris unwound the cloth. The nephew's truck was a puff of dust where the rutted lane headed

down when Smyrna came shuffling up, following her sixth sense about food. She passed the garden fence post and Quiet, who sat braiding and unbraiding stalks of grass in a nest of tall weeds and scattered sun.

When Vernita called Quiet came inside. After she chewed and swallowed a little of the meat and beans and bread, she went to the corner, undressed, and crawled under the covers.

"He's right you know." Doris was making more gravy from the last of the skillet juices. "She didn't bring nothing and she just sits. Doesn't even tell a joke."

The three ladies looked over at the prone lump.

"When's the last time you told a joke?" Vernita took the top piece of fry bread and used it as a carrier for a spoonful of currant jelly.

"Doris doesn't have to tell. She just acts them out for us each day, good as Dean Martin." Smyrna mopped her plate clean.

"Wasn't me that wore my sweater inside out going to town last week." Doris put the skillet on the table, got herself some bread and gravy. "And Dean Martin isn't all that funny."
