

Uncertain Alchemy

5.

Vernita and Doris always had a couple of arguments going. Quiet sidestepped the vehement spattering of their insults, no longer startled when one of them barked a rejoinder at the other a half day after the taunt which prompted it.

So she didn't think much of it one evening when she stepped inside, her arms full of kindling, and Vernita sliced off what she had been saying with a hiss to Doris "you watch."

Doris turned from the counter shaking her head.

When Vernita put supper on the table Doris would have no part. Neither of them said a word the rest of the evening.

They were all three eating a little breakfast with their coffee, the fire in the cookstove almost out, when a car came rattling up the road. Quiet saw the warning look Vernita shot Doris as footsteps came across the porch.

"Ready?" Smyrna strode the few steps to the table and helped herself to the last biscuit.

Doris patted Quiet's hand. "I'm only going along in case."

Vernita banged her plate and cup.

"You got a jacket or something?" As Smyrna raised her voice Quiet slipped her hand out from Doris' and sidled toward the bed.

Vernita folded an afghan like a shawl and draped it over Quiet, leading her toward the door.

The dusty black Packard had seen far better days. Weathered to a patchy midnight blue, its bands and bits of trim dangled mangled or missing. A glinting hood ornament caught Quiet's eye.

She stared, seeing nothing, reared back into Vernita.

"Quit your foolishness." Vernita gave her a bump behind the knees and shoved her into the backseat. As the last door slammed shut Smyrna raced the engine to a roar, popped it into gear, and shot the sedan downhill.

Quiet ran her hand along the musty mauve upholstery. She smelled Beverly's toilet water but saw before her a flickering cascade of bare tree branches, she remembered the smell of rich leather and cigarette smoke. In that other time a man was driving, his slender fingers playing with the steering wheel. She sat beside him as trees flew by, puddles splashing in arcs. Her fists clutched to her chest, Quiet shrugged off the afghan, kept her head down and her eyes closed against this road of dusty black rock and blurred barbed wire and that twilight memory of road.

At the bottom of the washboard hill the Packard lurched in a fantail to the right and fishtailed along what was little more than a ditch. One rutted and rock-spewing road and then another and no one said a word, they remained silent except for Doris'

farts and Beverly's sighs. The Packard hit blacktop and climbed through dry grass and basalt following a zigzagging canyon. Always up and the Packard faded, Smyrna stalwartly downshifting at the switchbacks, one eye on the climbing heat gauge. No one took notice of Quiet. They were each of them preoccupied with the plan at hand, wondering if they might be done with her.

The sun was just past overhead when they crested. Smyrna pulled over and sat sideways with her legs stuck out the open door, waiting for the engine to cool. Yakima lay below them, an irrigated island of green where they were not welcome.

Smyrna cruised the courthouse square twice while each of the aunties, full up with foreboding, eyed its clean sidewalks, its green grass and emptiness. Half a block further Smyrna parked in the shadow of a fruit warehouse, angled so they could just see the square.

Beverly took a paper from her purse and pinned it inside the neck of Quiet's blouse, her breath full of peppermint and bad teeth. She looked Quiet over, smoothed her collar, caressed her cheek. "Come now." With that she latched onto Quiet's elbow and her own purse with equally white knuckles and began the walk to the park. Sissie fell in step until they came to the first bench.

"We're going to that other one. By the post office."
Beverly let go of Quiet and kept walking.

Sissie anchored herself to the sidewalk like a broad rock in a river. "There's no sun there. This bench here, it's near the garbage can, so people come closer."

"You're making people watch."

Sissie took a look around. A man in a Stetson glanced their way as he cut across the square. She dropped Quiet's arm and walked slowly toward Beverly, then back. At the center of the bench she had chosen, she plopped down and patted the wooden slats beside her. "Sit. See if you don't know somebody."

Quiet did as she was told.

Beverly twisted the knob on her purse around and around. "People are wondering what you're doing, sitting with her."

Sissie spoke only to Quiet. "We'll be watching from the car, so it will be a good person."

Beverly leaned forward, lipstick cracked in the corners of her mouth. "If they want you to go with them, then go, you hear?" She plucked at Sissie's sleeve and Sissie heaved herself to her feet, took Beverly's arm, and left.

When they returned to the Packard Smyrna was slouched down behind the steering wheel like some movie-star detective. Doris sat shotgun beside her, not moving her eyes from Quiet as she begrudgingly made room for Sissie. Beverly settled in back, head against the door.

The sun found a low spot between rooftops and warmed the car. Smyrna began to snore. Cottonwoods overhead rattled, dropping an occasional golden leaf.

Men, quite a few men, walked through the square. Even those who used the trash bin next to Quiet did not so much as nod in her direction. Women, in pairs or threesomes, strolled the perimeter of the square. Sissie elbowed Doris. "You'd think she was invisible." A clock chimed six deep bongs.

It was getting chilly. No one but Quiet was in the square.

"This is horse foey." Dusk was beginning its dilution. Vernita stamped her foot and got them all to jump. "We can't even see her no more."

"We can see enough. We said we were gonna wait." Smyrna was awake, refreshed, and ready to continue the vigil.

Vernita pulled the afghan around herself. "This is not a good plan. I was saying—"

"Somebody will take a second look. Her out there all alone." Beverly was not as sure as she sounded.

"A cop is who will take a look." Doris knew how to shut them all up.

"Watch now." Beverly squeezed her head between Doris and Smyrna. A man in a suit looked around and turned, walked back past the shadowy lump that was Quiet. He walked slowly, studying her, glancing around to see if anyone was watching.

"He wants to do something dirty." Doris pushed at Sissie.

"He ain't doing nothing." Smyrna's hand was on the door just in case. The man turned and stopped in front of Quiet. Quiet didn't move.

"He wants to but he's scared" Doris whispered.

He stood facing Quiet, looking everywhere but at her, rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets, tossed his head toward the far corner of the park.

"He won't know the difference if I just walk by." Smyrna lumbered out of the car and strolled the perimeter of the park. The man took his hands out of his pockets and made a hasty get-away. Smyrna circled back to the car.

Sissie rolled down her window, reached outside, and opened her door. With a grunt she got herself upright, slammed the door, and began her sing-song shuffle toward Quiet.

When she lumbered back she was half buried, one arm around Quiet's waist, the other pulling to keep Quiet's arm over her shoulder. Smyrna ordered Doris out, hoisted Quiet and shoved her in front. All the aunties repositioned themselves as the Packard lurched away from the curb. Doris kept watch out the back window.

The heater and Sissie competed for loudest wheeze. "How cold she is." Beverly rubbed Quiet's neck and shoulders from behind.

"Of course she's cold. Out there on a bench all the way to dark."

"What do you care Vernita?"

"Doris you shut."

Beverly passed the afghan forward.

The car's time-loosed suspension dipped and swayed as Smyrna left the streetlights and pavement of the city behind in an ever accelerating roar, headlights cutting a wedge of light.

"When I got there I told her get up, get up, and she didn't move. So I took her hand." Sissie coughed carefully, a humming buzz at the end. "She just came over sideways."

"She's shaking like a loose shingle."

"Get close to her Sis."

Smyrna stopped the car in the middle of the road and turned to the back seat, careful not to disturb Quiet. "We don't have enough gas to go for a tour. If I don't hear different, I'm driving to Sissie's" she glared at each of them "and everybody, including her, gets out there."

For a slight moment there was only the blowing of the heater and a knock from the engine.

"She can't stay with me." Sissie mumbled to the windshield but they all heard. "There isn't a spot of room. My daughter's kids, they—"

"They think she might have money. I heard them talking—" Beverly had heard enough. "You got big ears for mean talk Vernita."

Sissie plaintively sealed her case. "It only makes sense for her to go back to Doris and Vernita."

Vernita spoke under her breath, an expletive. A leaf caught in the vent and rattled.

"Only for a little bit. We can't just keep her" Doris knew she'd been outmaneuvered.

"Then it's settled." Smyrna put the Packard in gear and drove.

Quiet's eyes opened to a glowing dashboard, the chrome goddess of speed racing ahead into the night. She sat close and lit a cigarette for him, jazz flickering on the radio, tires hissing on wet pavement as the car soared. He glanced at her and smiled, fingers cool and they lingered on hers when he took the cigarette, smoke curling away from the heater vents. She was nervous but confident too.

He glided the car curbside, leaned across her to open the door, his hand on her thigh and she sniffed the bay rum of his aftershave. That was their first kiss. And then she— he never said no, exactly, all the times she asked. It was only in another time she learned he had never meant yes. She was left on

a doorstep the streets shiny from rain, the taillights of his car shrinking small and smaller.

The Packard bottomed out with a harsh scrape, a skinny pine tree stark in the headlights. Quiet's teeth chattered, her body quaked, the heater burned her shins with the smell of mildewed dust. Sissie got out and took the warmth with her.

Smyrna reached in and lugged Quiet out of the car, up the porch steps, and left her on the bench. Inside, Vernita lit a lantern while Doris worked Quiet out of her skirt and shoes and under the bed covers.

"She'll be fine. She just got cold." Vernita put the kettle on and set out two mugs for tea, her arms wrapped around herself as she waited for the fire.

Quiet was dozing when Doris slipped into bed beside her, the window above full of darkness and stars. She had waited on the bench as they told her to. The aunties came back for her. Doris pulled at the covers, rocking her hips, getting comfortable. In the park, the man's mouth twisted while he spoke. That night in the car, it was only later, in a bright room his smile was not really a smile.

Vernita snored. The moonlight traveled across the floor.
