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### *Big Brother*

My man Eugene been dead about a year and a half by now and soon this Big Brother gonna come along. I say last thing I want around here is another man, I'm finished with men forever, and it be a cold day in hell before I take up with one again, but the social worker say Terrence suffering for lack of some male companionship. Although, shoot, when his daddy was alive he didn't have hardly no more male companionship than he have now, and I don't see what difference it going to make in his life.

I be glad enough if everybody leave us alone, male or not. That seem to be all I ask for these days, just some peace and quiet. But it true that Terrence sure be acting funny. The other day he was playing around in the cabinet by the tv and he shout, "Where all my videos! They some missing! Momma, you been loaning out my videos to people?" "Get a hold of yo'self, I ain't been loaning out your videos to nobody." "Yes you have," he say, "You giving away my things." And on and on he go in his booming voice until I sit down with him and we name off all the videos he has one by one and match em up with the videos in the cabinet and even then it hard to convince him that no one's messing with his stuff.

Most evenings he too wound up to fall asleep, so he come crawl on the couch with me while I watch the news. Terrence built round and solid, he big for eight year old, with a head shaped like a torpedo packed with stubbornness. He take up too much room on the couch, he be poking me, and grabbing the blanket offa me and trying to shove away my legs. Asking questions. "Momma, what that lady kill her five kids for?" or "Where that girl in Washington disappear to?" or "What country that? Israel? Why they screaming and throwing rocks at each other, huh?" I don't pay no attention to the tv no more, I just like to have it on cause it keep me from thinking too much. I be dropping off, snoring with my head on my arm, and still he bouncing up and down on my butt, flicking the remote every time a commercial come on. I don't get no relief. Just when I fall asleep, he shake my shoulder, hard, and put his big old face right in mine until I wake up and the first thing I see is his eyes, big and

brown with those long trembling lashes and he spluttering, “Momma! Momma! I think yo’ skin is getting *black*. I been watching you and I think it getting darker while you sleeping. Wake up!” The medications I take are changing the pigment in my skin, ain’t nothing I can do about it, and it true, sometimes when I look in the mirror I think, damn, it look like I been rubbing coal on my face. Terrence worried his momma gonna turn so black she gonna disappear. So he got to keep me conscious at all times to make sure all that blackness don’t swallow me up.

That child wear me out. He a lot like his daddy Eugene, he got a way of draining you with all his needs. Shit, ain’t it my turn to rest now, I think, ain’t I been through enough already? But I know Terrence need more and I can’t bring him out of this craziness on my own. Terrence need fresh air and fresh eyes too to look around with. And that another reason why I say, OK, bring that Big Brother on. Terrence all excited. He picturing someone in his mind like Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson. Someone all muscled that can do something you wouldn’t believe with a ball.

But Big Brother ain’t big and he sure ain’t no brother. When I see him I think, uh oh, what they sending me here. One of them rich white dudes trying to pretend like they’s poor. His family got some cream. You can just tell. Big Brother skinny, wearing nasty ripped jeans falling off his butt, but he got on one expensive pair of Nike sneakers that give him away. But after a second I reconsider about the pretending part. The truth is, he don’t give a shit about what he wearing on his feet. He too sad for that. Be sad from top to toe, everything on that boy just *drooping*, even that thin blonde mustache he got just hanging off his lip, make me want to rip it off. This boy in some kind of trouble, I think. Ain’t no way this gonna work out, and I feel sorry for Terrence, getting his hopes up. Big Brother done lost his *bounce*. And he too young for that. I bet he no more than twenty year old. Not even that.

First thing Big Brother do when he step in my apartment is look at my chest and blush. I’m not so fine, but I got me some curves and it hot so I wearing a halter top and no bra underneath. I fold my arms over my chest.

“Hi, I’m Keith,” he say, blushing. He hold out his hand to shake and when I take it the palm is wet.

“I’m Nickie, and this my boy Terrence.”

“Hey, man, give me five.”

So Terrence slap him good and Big Brother reel back and say, “Whoa!” and he rub his hand over his jeans and I know his hand is really smarting and that he ain’t pretending at all, he ain’t putting on a show just to make Terrence giggle. Terrence be strong, and Big Brother look like he put together with putty.

“What that say on your shirt?” Terrence ask.

Big Brother scrunch his chin down to look at his chest, like he forgot what he put on that morning. When he speak his eyes go back and forth. “This? This says Tanglewood Music Festival. That’s a . . . well, this kind of summer camp for musicians . . . back east . . . I mean, they take classes and all, classical musicians.”

“You a musician?” Terrence say, hopefully.

“Oh . . . ah . . . I used to play the piano . . . but that was a long time ago. Like in another kind of life.”

“How come you don’t play no more?” Terrence demand.

“I just gave it up, that’s all. It didn’t, you know, it didn’t have the same kind of meaning, like, that it used to have for me. And I, ah, don’t even have a piano to practice on anymore.”

“You gonna play again some day?” That Terrence, he don’t know when to stop.

“Maybe,” say Big Brother. He look sad. “I don’t know.” He think and say, “Probably not.”

Terrence just stare at him and I say, “Terrence, quit your nosiness,” and Big Brother put up his hand and shake his head and say, “No, no, that’s OK, it’s good to be curious. Hey, Terrence, man, show me your room, OK? I bet you got a great room.”

So Terrence take Big Brother to his room and he introduce him to all his Star Wars fighter jets and his whole collection of Yu-Gi-Oh cards and there the two of them are sitting on the rug cross-legged and Big Brother squinting at the cards, trying to read what is printed on them and Terrence yelling out the rules to the game, all excited. In the middle of playing Terrence run to me and say, “Hey, Momma, I like the big brother!” and then he run back. He so eager to have a new friend.

But there are some things I need to get straight with Big Brother right away, so I interrupt them while Big Brother leaning over the game board (his shirt pull up and I can see his bony spine and part of some striped underwear sticking over the top of his jeans) and I

say, "Excuse me, Keith, could I have a word with you?" and he say, "Yes, ma'am," and follow me to the kitchen shuffling and hunching his shoulders.

"Now I know you know I'm HIV cause this HIV housing," I say to him. "But I want you to know that my boy Terrence ain't HIV, in case you was wondering. And he don't know nothing about it, neither, so I'd appreciate it if you didn't talk about that with him."

Big Brother move back against the counter, put up his hands. "That's cool."

Then he clear his throat and say, "Terrence seems like a great kid. I think we're gonna get along."

I don't trust nobody who compliment kids too fast; also, I don't want Big Brother thinking he gonna have an easy time here. So I say, "Terrence stubborn. He stubborn and he willful. He a lot like his daddy. He never pay attention to what people say. If he don't do what you tell him, you come talk to me about it."

"Well. . ." Big Brother say. And there go his eyes, right down to my chest again.

"How old you be?" I say all of a sudden.

"Nineteen." He blush.

"Umm-hmm."

"And how about you, Nickie?"

"Me? Thirty-one."

"Thirty-one." He cough a bit. "That's a great age. I'd like to be, ah, in my thirties, cause that's when you have it all together, you know what I mean? I mean, you're still young and all that but then you've done some of your soul-work and you're, ah, a lot more self-aware. I like hanging out with people in their thirties. I find it, like, enriching."

This guy crazy, I think. What I bring him in my house for?

"OK, cool," he say. "I'm glad we had this talk."

After that Big Brother come once a week, and sometimes he take Terrence places like the zoo and the beach and the Exploratorium and the big playground in Golden Gate Park with the long slides Terrence like so much. Terrence bragging about him to all his school friends, I know it. Minute he get on that school bus in the morning he just busting with all the stuff he got saved up to tell, and it don't matter who he tell it to, he collar the first kid he sit next to on the bus and pin him down till the ride is over, saying, "You know what

me and my Big Brother done yesterday?” He so happy he leaping on Big Brother and strangling him and wrapping himself all over his body. Once I see him riding on Big Brother’s back and saying, “Giddyup! Giddyup!” and I worry he gonna break that poor boy, so I shout, “Terrence! Now you let up on Keith, you hear!” Keith say, “Oh, it’s ok, Nickie, I don’t mind,” but I explain to him that Terrence got to work on his behavior and his listening skills and don’t be interfering with me when I’m trying to discipline my child. Big Brother blink and look embarrassed.

And one time Big Brother bring over an electric keyboard he borrowed offa someone and teach Terrence how to play his scales. Then he play something for Terrence, something long and slow and soft. I listen in, standing in the hallway. Big Brother can see me, all right, but he don’t let on. The music so pretty I have to hold my breath so I won’t miss none. And sad. The sadness creep up on me little by little till I just standing there with my throat closed up with grief, tears ready to squeeze out.

When he finish, he look up at me quickly, to make sure I’m still there, and then he scratch his neck and blush a little and say, “That’s Chopin, dude.” And right then I know he really playing that music for me even though he appear to be playing it for Terrence. The thought don’t make me so comfortable.

Terrence’s jaw hanging open. “Man, how did you do that without looking at no music sheet?”

Big Brother a little proud of himself, and excited too. “I got that in my head. I remembered it. I *still* remember it, I didn’t know that.”

Then he sneak a glance at me just to see am I proud of him. I can’t help thinking, Big Brother, do your momma know where you is? He want someone to put out cookies and milk for him, and remind him to wipe his behind twice. He looking at me hopefully, but I think to myself, hell, boy, don’t you know that I ain’t got nothing left over for nobody? That Eugene took it out of me. Took it all out, and then give me something I can’t ever get rid of. Men is all children, it don’t matter how old they are or how big they are, they all squirming to get back to that nice warm comfy place they come from. That the only time they feel safe. But what about us, I say? We making them safe but what they doing for us in the meantime? Unh-uhn. All that business ain’t for Nickie no more.

But don't you know it, the minute you show them you ain't interested, that when they can't leave you alone. One week Big Brother show up too early. He know that Terrence don't come home from school for another hour. He making up excuses, saying his watch be running too fast. Stand there with his ponytail and his blue eyes blinking, saying, well, uh, do you think I could come in for a little while, I don't have anywhere else to go at this particular time. So I open the door just a little wider and make a motion with my hand and say, "Well, it ain't no skin off my ass."

He sprawl on my couch with his legs spread far apart. You know the way men sit, taking up more room than they need. Tap on the armrest with his fingers, look around him, humming something soft. Today he wearing shorts and his legs is covered with long curly blonde hair. Got some tattoo I never noticed before on his left calf, a seahorse or some kinda shit like that. I move back and forth picking up Terrence's toys and he follow me with his gaze; I can see he trying not to, but his eyeballs is sliding over my hips and my breasts and I can't get away, wouldn't matter if I went into another room, his eyes would burn a hole through the walls, and I be lost cause you know that young boy can even see me with his eyes closed, and when that happen, you finished, girl. I think to myself, why a woman built like this to make a man dream on her body. I mad at my titties and my pussy and all the rest of it.

I mad at *him*. I be tired and diseased and I ain't even good looking no more. I got a right to be left alone. I think, why he messing with me, anyhow? He so hard up he got to make it with an HIV lady? Huh, dumb kid.

But it like he don't see how angry I am cause he got that goofy expression on his face when he stare at me, that moony look like he wandered in from outer space.

"Nickie, can I ask you a question?" he say finally.

I shrug. I be wearing my pout, the same one Terrence inherited from me.

"Are you afraid of dying?"

I just stare at him.

He hold out his hands and wave them a little in front of him. "OK, OK, I know that's kind of personal, everyone's idea of, well, mortality and everything, but I just thought I'd ask because when I look at you, you seem to be so strong, I think of you as the kind of person

who's made her peace with death. You just radiate an inner strength that way, you know what I mean? Like I know you're not up at three in the morning worrying whether if you're in a coma someone's going to mistake you for dead and bury you alive." That boy chuckle and rub his hand over the front of his shirt. His knees twitch. "Or what it's going to feel like, whether it's going to be all darkness and shit or whether you're going to be walking through some tunnel with a light on the other side. What's waiting for you there. When I see you, I see someone who's so beyond that. Fear. I met this American Indian guy once who had the same kind of attitude. With him it was really spiritual, you know? He took me to a sweat lodge with him, wow, what an incredible experience. You can learn so much about yourself that way. Sweating. It's like *everything* opens up, man."

What this boy babbling about? *What* this boy babbling about?

Then I sit down next to him on the couch. He jump a bit, knees twitching. "Where you get all these crazy ideas? What you worrying about all that Indian bullshit for? You know how to play the piano, why don't you do that. Ain't that enough? *Shit.*"

Big Brother shake his head and say, "I can't play the piano anymore, I forgot how."

"Huh! You was playin' it the other day."

"What good's playing the piano," Big Brother insist. "I used to know lots of musicians. They don't know anything about life. They don't know what it all means, man." Then he look down at his hands lying palm up on his knees like he never seen them before in his life and is surprised to find them at the ends of his arms. He say softly, "I got it too, Nickie."

"You got what?" But then, a second later, I know what he talking about and I feel bad for asking. I shake my head. Umm, times are hard. And he no more than just a boy, too.

Suddenly Big Brother's nose and the sides of his nose turn all red and he make this awful sucking sound and I think, shit, that boy crying. He lean back and pinch the bridge of his nose like he pinching off a nose bleed and he shake his head and say, "This is bad, man. Oh man, this is bad." He suck and snort some more like he trying to vacuum away the tears. Some snot run down onto that idiot mustache of his. "Oh God, I got to stop this."

I go to the kitchen and get him a tall glass of ice water. He gulp it down fast like all the thirst in the world is inside of him and it need quenching, quick. Then he wipe his mouth. He all shaken up.

“It ain’t no death sentence no more,” I say to him. “Look at me, I’m still kickin’.”

Maybe that just the problem, I think, suddenly. It ain’t dying, it living that give us such a hard time. I don’t know how to do it no more. Everything I once knew about it don’t mean nothing now. My heart feel heavy. I can’t go on with no pep talk.

Suddenly I miss Eugene, and those feelings surprise me. One thing about my man Eugene, he was sure difficult, raising hell and shouting and scaring the shit out of poor Terrence when he was around, but you know what, he could always take me out of myself. He made me laugh. Eugene was a kind of comedian, like Will Smith or Chris Rock, he could do voices and imitations or just take a subject and roll with it for awhile, any unimportant thing, like the weather or fast food, and he made it so funny the tears come. That must be why I kept him around longer than I should’ve. He wasn’t funny all the time, though. Most of the time he was someone who needed to be locked up.

I feel them moony eyes of Big Brother’s fixed on me. I scold myself for looking back on Eugene. Where that going to get me?

“Where you from, Keith?” I ask.

“Hillsborough,” he mumble, looking away a bit.

“Hillsborough!” I guessed him right. I whistle through my teeth and Big Brother blush.

“Well, I used to be from there,” he say. “I don’t consider that to be home anymore. I mean, my parents made it pretty clear they don’t want me to come back. Although they do give me money and stuff. After they found out what was wrong with me my dad told me my mom had a nervous breakdown and that, you know, she couldn’t, like, bear to see me. She had these dreams for me, she wanted me to be a classical pianist like my uncle. I wasn’t all that good at it, though. I mean, I liked it, but I didn’t feel like practicing eight hours a day. Now I think, well, maybe there are other paths, you know? I think my dad’s pretty disgusted with me too.”

“Was you on the down low or something?”

He don’t get my meaning. I explain it to him and he turn a little red around the ears and say, “Oh. Well, just a couple of times. It was

just a phase I was going through. I have this theory that we're all, like, designed to be attracted to both sexes, but the balance is different in each person. Like some of us are ninety percent straight and ten percent gay, you know? Then others are eighty percent gay and twenty percent straight. It's really interesting when you think about it."

"Umm-hmm," I say. This boy *tripping*.

"But I'm not gay. I really like women," he say, looking at me hopefully.

"Hmmpf."

"This Big Brother stuff has been great. It's really helped me change my perspective on the whole thing. Playing with Terrence, and meeting you, Nickie—just watching how you are. You're great. I mean, that first day I met you and you were so upfront about having HIV—you just *said* it. I admire that."

"But you already knew I was HIV anyhow. Agency must have told you that."

"Yeah, but, you weren't afraid to say it out loud. I knew you were someone I could talk to about it. Be open. I don't—well, I don't really know anyone else who's positive."

"Shit, everybody I know is positive," I say to him. "And there ain't nothing to talk about."

I frown, to put him off. Instead, though, he fix them pretty blue eyes on mine, for once they not wandering to my chest. He making me uncomfortable, the way he staring, like he can see right through me to the other side. Now he seem more like a man to me, like he made up his mind to grow up. That definitely the way a man look at a woman.

"Nickie," he say to me in a husky, choked-up kind of voice, "you must have really loved him, huh—Terrence's father?"

"Eugene!" I laugh. Now he acting like a boy again. "Eugene was my man, that all there was to it."

"What was he like?"

I laugh again. "I don't know what he was like!"

Then, for no reason I can figure, I tell him the story about how one day when I was visiting Eugene when he was in San Francisco General, dying up in Ward 84, a television crew come to the ward, doing a story about how it changed over the course of the epidemic. Now, Eugene, he was in and out of Ward 84 for ten years. This the

last time he was going to be there and he knew it. When he saw the TV cameras, he started shouting and waving them over. "Hey, I got AIDS! I got AIDS, come on over and talk to me!" So he made such a commotion they finally came over and interviewed him. He was so pleased he was grinning like a fool, didn't matter that tubes was coming out of him everywhere, a big white bandage on his head, and he half blind, too. He went on and on about San Francisco General and all the AIDS docs, and he was real funny, that crew liked him, he had them laughing, and they let him go on for a long time. He was *jamm*ing. When they left, he was so excited he got all his tubes tangled from flailing his arms around. Made me stay until the news came on and, sure enough, there he was. News channel gave him a full minute. All the nurses and orderlies and whatever doctor was on call came and stood around and watched him and he said, squinting through his blind eyes, "Hey, that *me!* That me, Eugene!" Finally he got to be on TV. His big chance. That man lived on that high for days and days, couldn't nothing bring him down. Then, two weeks later, he passed.

Why I tell that story? It used to be funny but it ain't funny no more.

Big Brother hanging on my every word and when I finish he say, in the same husky voice like before, "I love that you shared that with me, Nickie."

Then he grab my hand and squeeze it. I try to pull away but not hard enough. Big Brother got one hot and sweaty paw. I be so embarrassed I don't know what to do. Then suddenly Big Brother leaning in on me, and then he kissing me. That little fuzzy caterpillar mustache tickling my mouth. But underneath, his lips firm, and they know what they's doing, that for sure.

Just when he about to slip in his tongue, I push him away. "Now quit, Terrence gonna be coming home any minute."

After that I know I got things to sort out in my mind. This Big Brother has turned into a situation on my hands. Now I know all I have to do is call the agency and they take him away, it simple. Damn, I know it must be against the rules for Big Brother to be putting the moves on me. Poor Big Brother so stupid, he don't even begin to know how the world work. Thinking how stupid he be get me to feeling sorry for him, and that ain't good. Also I think, well, Terrence be much happier now that Big Brother around, and that

the truth too. He chilled out a lot and he not acting up in school so much. And then I think Big Brother seem happier too, since he begun playing with Terrence. He like teaching Terrence the piano. That one thing in life he *do* know something about.

Geraldine, the girl from the second floor, come knocking on my door with some comments to make as usual. I always know it be her from the way she knock, but I make a big show of asking who is it and turning the deadbolt and taking off the chain lock, to discourage her from thinking how easy it is to come upstairs and borrow things offa Nickie.

Geraldine got a belly showing about four months of pregnancy but I keep my mouth shut, I don't want to get her started. "You got some tampons?" she ask me first thing, without even saying hello.

Now what do she need tampons for, I think, looking her up and down.

She see my look and say, "They for my niece, she visitin' me, and her monthly came."

So why she can't go to the store and buy some. "Yeah, I got tampons," I say out loud.

"Can I borrow some?"

"You can *have* them, shoot, Geraldine, I sure don't want them back once they been used."

She giggles and I fetch her the box and she say, "Ain't you got the super plus kind?"

"This all I got, girl."

"Well, the super plus is better."

I shrug. She take the box under her arm and say, "Who that white boy been coming by your place? He so fly."

"What you been doing, spying on me?"

Now she the one playing it cool. "Oh, I seen him come around sometime. I know he don't belong to *you* because you sworn offa men." She laugh.

"He a Big Brother for Terrence. And he ain't fly at all."

"Sure he fly. He got that blonde hair."

"Hah. Maybe, but he got one bony butt."

Geraldine laugh and lean into the door. I never once asked her do she want to come in, the whole time I been living here. She bleeding me dry, always calling can I come braid her hair, can she borrow some pink nail polish, can I watch her kid, can he play with Terrence

(but that kid so twisted I don't want Terrence nowhere near him), can she borrow twenty dollar till her check come. She accuse me of not being neighborly. She damn right, I ain't neighborly. Also, I don't participate in the monthly meetings the building social worker direct. She hold that against me too. Who I think I am, acting like I don't need nobody or nothing? This ain't the building to be private in. I do my best, but I'm too poor to live in Hillsborough, where you don't need to talk to nobody if you don't feel like it. Where you can put up walls the fools can't climb. And poor Big Brother on the other side of those walls now, doing for himself the best he can.

Now I'm mad because I let myself warm up to her and she gonna think I'm down with her.

"Listen, I got to get going," I tell her, half way closing the door.

She wink. "Well, if you don't want him, you send him by me, hear?"

Geraldine a whore. She got one HIV baby and she probably gonna have another one and now she bragging about getting into bed with white boys. Sex is all she got on her mind, day and night.

And she *would* take Big Brother into her bed, if she had a chance. And he'd go, too, he so dumb. I think, he better off with me than he is with Geraldine or any other nigger whore he gonna run across. I get a flash of anger thinking about Geraldine messing with him. That night in bed I start fingering myself, something I ain't done in a long, long time. I'm thinking a little bit about Eugene and a little bit about Big Brother, and the two get scrambled in my head, and I'm tossing and turning trying to find some relief, and finally I put a pillow under my stomach and hump myself over the top.

So next week Big Brother show up at my door the night Terrence is away on an overnight camping trip with the YMCA. I know he know this, and he know that I know he know this, so I don't say one word about it.

"Nickie," he say in his hoarse voice. "I just can't stop thinking about you. Ever since that afternoon when we were talking. I just feel a real, like, a real connection with you. I don't know how to put it into words. I think I'm—well, I think I'm falling in love with you, Nickie."

I don't let him say much more because he gonna irritate me. Instead, I take his hand and lead him into the bedroom. I say to him, "Take off your clothes and lie down."

He look a little shy, and his hand is trembling with the unbuttoning and unzipping, but he do just what I say. When he lying down naked on my bed I think to myself, well, he ain't half bad with his clothes off, don't appear as skinny, and more hair on his body than I thought, and then I can't help but notice that in some areas he ain't no boy at all. He standing right up into manhood. He catch me looking and then he smile.

I take off my shirt and undo my bra and give him a tittie to hold. Then the expression on his face is like he in church and the preacher be talking about salvation and he just caught on to what the idea is all about. He say to me, Nickie, you're more beautiful than music, and I just laugh. I reach down and squeeze him and then his expression is beyond church. Then it like he seen Jesus Himself and the light is too much for him and he fall back on the pillow with his eyes closed and groan.

Big Brother make me a lady two time that night, and ooh honey, I know that when he wake up in the morning, I be a lady two more time again before breakfast. I sit up in bed and watch him sleeping. A little light from the window fall across his face. His skin so white and smooth, and his hair out of the ponytail, spread across the pillow. It fine and a little scraggly. Need conditioning. He stir and smack his lips in a happy way. I sigh. Damn, I wish I was nineteen again. I know too much at my age. Man and woman in bed together, naked. How you think that gonna end?