

The Tambourine Lady · *John Wideman*

NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP . . . there would be new shoes in the morning. New shoes and an old dress white as new. White and starched as angel wings and hair perfect as heat and grease could press it to her skull. There would be hands to hold as she rose up from the curb onto the one step which took you from Homewood Avenue, which was nowhere, to the door of the church wide as heaven. Hands she'd need to steady her across the threshold, the tall, red doors, from cement to the velvet cushioned wobble of God's purple carpet. Always unsteady as she passed to His world. Like that first step off the moving stairs in Kaufmann's Department Store downtown when you think you might be falling and the hard cold floor rushing up to crack your knees and elbows. At the door of the church her mother's hand, the hands of Miss Goings in her soft white gloves to help her through. She might lose her breath, her heart would stutter but she wouldn't fall. Old Miss Goings in her starched nurse's uniform. Her hand was like petting a rabbit. Miz Goings smelling like Johnson's Baby Powder who'd say, *My sweet girl* or *Bless you, Darling daughter* or just *Sugar* so the wide doors did not swallow you or slam in your face.

New shoes pinched your feet sometimes. Too big, too small, too much money, too ugly for anybody. The white ladies who sold them would stick any old thing on your feet and smile. But sometimes when her feet were in new shoes she couldn't feel them at all. She floated, unsure whether or not the shoes were still down there, stepping when she stepped, wondering if she'd lost them, brand new and costing money nobody has, lost them a long time ago because that's how they felt. Like the shoes didn't belong to her when they were new and shiny because she wasn't new and shiny like them. She was nobody, nowhere, dreaming about a little girl in new shoes she'd never own, shoes that wouldn't be down there if she looked to the end of the white socks at the ends of her black legs.

New shoes couldn't be trusted. Even if you polished them till you saw your face inside. So in the morning she'd polish them again and then wash and dry her face and clean her hands and tug the yellow sash straight. Make sure of everything in the mirror, then check the mirror again on the threshold of AMEZ church, the mirror in the gray sky, the mirror in the brick wall, the mirror of her mother's hand and the

hand of Miss Goings reaching for hers, patting her ashy skin and promising she would not fall.

She said her prayers and closed her eyes and heard tambourines. Crashing like a pocketful of change in her Daddy's pants when he stuck his hand in and rattled round, teasing out a piece of money for her. Like somebody saying dish dish dish dish and every dish piled with something good to eat.

Dish. Dish.

And if I die . . . before I wake. You walked funny because more crack than sidewalk some places on the way home from school. You used the street to get past the real bad busted up parts. You looked both ways but you knew you might die. *A thousand times. A thousand times I've told you to stay out the street, girl.* But if the sidewalk looked like a witch's face you'd rather get runned over than step on a crack and break Mama's back. So you looked both ways up and down the street like Mama always said. You looked and listened and hoped you wouldn't get hit like little fat Angela everybody called Jelly who was playing in Cassina Way and the car mashed her up against the fence where you can still see the spot to this day.

She'd felt mashed like Jelly when Tommy Bonds pushed her down. He laughed and called her crybaby. Said you ain't hurt and ran away. But she wasn't no crybaby over no little blood snot on her knee. She cried cause he hurt her Mama. Pushed her into the spider web of cracks cause he knew what she was playing. She'd told him her secret one day when she thought they were friends. But he never really was. He hated her and pushed her right dead down in a whole mess of snakes. Crying cause she couldn't get out without stepping on more. He hated her. Followed her and called her nasty till she stopped, hands on hips, and Boy I ain't studying you. Study this you nasty bitch and he was running her down the street. She was scared or playing or just happy to have him after her again no matter what he wanted to do. Forgetting his fists, his nasty mouth, forgetting everything as he flew down the street after her. Then she stopped. Said to herself, see what he want now. And all he wanted was to push her down. Kill her Mama.

She'd told Tommy her secret. That day he'd detoured into the street with her. Played her game and the cars whipping past on Hamilton Avenue had never been louder, closer, their wind up under her clothes when he ran with her the twenty steps past Witch Face City. And never had she cared less about getting mashed because who ever heard of a car killing two at a time.

Tommy, Tommy Tommy *Bonds*. If she didn't duck just in time the rope would cut off her neck. If she didn't bounce high enough there go her cut-off feet hopping down the street all by they ownelves. Say it, girl. Say it. *Bonds* was when the rope popped the ground. Tommy three times while the loop turned lazy in the air.

Shake it to the east, Shake it to the west. Now tell the one you love the best. Say it out loud, girl. We ain't turning for nothing.

Tommy Tommy Tommy *Bonds*. She is not crying because it hurts. A little snotty looking blood. Scab on her knee next day. That's all. That's not why, Mister Smarty-pants. Mister Know-it-all. But she can't say his name, can't say what she's thinking because the tears in her nose and ears and mouth might come spilling out her eyes.

The lady who beat the tambourine and sang in church was a Russell. Tomorrow was church so this was Saturday night and her Mama ironing in the kitchen and her Daddy away so long he mize well be dead and the new patent leather shoes in their box beneath her side of the bed. Saying her prayers she thought how long it took to get to the end, how the world be over and gone while you still saying the words to yourself. The words her mother taught her and said her mother had taught her so somebody would always be saying them. So God would not forget his children. Saying the words this Saturday night she was lost as she was sometimes in new shoes. *Now I lay me down . . .* like the words were doors and she had to peek inside everyone she spoke and so much there, so wide she could look forever. Good things she wanted to see and bad things she didn't want to say all scrambled up together. What kept her from falling, what kept the words coming like the lazy rope snapping on time at the pavement was the wish that maybe that lady be singing her tambourine song tomorrow morning in church.