

## *Erika Gentry*

### BAD JOHN GOING DOWN

Because I've taken a life, I'm not looking to get mine back. I been straight-up with Tamar about this from the very beginning. But she says, "Oh no, man, you too smart for that. If we were in Port-of-Spain, maybe I could be scared. But you are no bad john, man. You are a painter. In America, a man don't have to be a bad john." And I say, "Straight up, Tamar. You're right this is not Port-of-Spain, and I'm not down with this bad john shit. I'm talking divine providence, sweetheart. You just need to know before you hook up with me that I'm going down."

A woman like Tamar doesn't necessarily need to be reminded of this. But she still does so much stroking. I say, "Woman, you'd make a hero out of a dying roach . . . talk about his brave stand against the pesticide." She says, "A man who paint like this is not gon' dead yet. He could be a roach. He probably is a roach, but he is still strong breathing." Some months ago, before we were living together, she brought a painting from the small room where I was working and sleeping to her own apartment across the hall and leaned it against her mantelpiece. It was three men attacking another man with sticks and stones: small, black figures in high relief, in the right foreground of a large red canvas. Nothing more. "I have seen this very thing before in Port-of-Spain at carnival time," she says. She sat for almost twenty minutes with her cheeks in her palms staring at it. "Do you know about Trinidadian Carnival," she asks. "Basically," I answer, "Party. Party."

"I am not joking," she says.

A few weeks after this, when I've moved into her apartment, her husband, Roland, or the American her family paid to marry her and bring her over here comes knocking on the door. He wants more money and even threatens Tamar because he doesn't know that I'm painting in the next room. I come out and try to reason with him, but he's a smart shit. Starts talking about the apartment being his established residence and how it's not going to go over too good with immigration that I'm actually the one living here. Of course, he wants more money. Of course, I have a temper. I kick his punk ass down the steps and get him so that he's kissing the linoleum and repeating the words, "I worship the ground that woman walks on." Tamar doesn't like this.

She beats my back until I let the man go. That evening, she takes the painting from in front of her mantel, walks into the room I've turned into my studio naked with only the canvas covering her. "I got a chance here," she says.

"A chance for what?" I ask.

"A chance," she says, "to take up one corner of your mind, so that beating and hurting is not all you want to do."

"Tamar," I say, "I told you, honey, I'm not down with this bad john shit. I don't generally go around fucking people up, but you know, I will do the job if necessary."

"Mojo," she says, "I don't see the necessary. This is important to me, okay. You will see nothing more than the face of that boy you killed until you beat your own self into the ground. I hope something else for you . . . for us, okay."

"Okay," I say. She lets the canvas drop, and I'm not complaining, because I'm already in love with the woman's body. She says it's just a temporary thing, until I can learn to appreciate something other than beating a man and shoving his face into the floor. But I'm not into painting live subjects. And though I have some experience with it from art school, really, I don't know how. What I do know how to do is fuck Tamar, so that whole session doesn't go over too well. Anyway, later, it begins to work out for me. I can't get her to sit for long, which is fine. I see her wherever she is, this beautiful baby woman chopping celery for the Eat 'n Park or something simple like her staring out her window at some drunk who has fallen in the street. "They're sketches," I say. "I'm just watching you now."

"For what?" she asks.

"Something larger," I say. And when she looks surprised and hurt I say, "No, baby, I just mean for a larger painting. My own 'larger' idea about where I want to put you."

"You should go back to what you paint before," she says, "but remember this time, this attention on me, and feel softened, know that there is more in the world side from beating and hurting and . . ."

"Baby, don't start telling me what to paint and what not to paint."

"Mojo, I just say if you forget your anger altogether . . ."

"I'm not angry," I say.

"Yes, you are," she says. "Poor Roland seen it, felt it. I seen you like a crazy man with my own two eyes. You don't work this anger, its jumbie will always haunt you."

“No,” I say, “jumbie is not what haunts me.” Women are so hard to please.

Not that pleasing her is really my goal. I am with her not because I deserve her, but because I understand one thing about her. She is a cat, not really needing me. She would argue this; it would mean to her that she is not taking care. But more than Tamar cares for me, she cares for love and giving love. I’ve never been with a woman like her, but I know enough about the way people slide in and out of one another’s lives to not waste time thinking about why I don’t deserve her. This woman especially. She is moving like quick fire . . . shedding skin. I want to say, “Go on with it, baby. No need to ask who you leave behind for forgiveness.”

In bed, she reads me letters from Port-of-Spain, and she tries to hide her anger when I give her only dead end responses. “Do you believe this person is doing this to my friend?”

“Um, yes baby, I do. I believe completely in the breakdown of human dignity. It comes on almost all of us, quicker on some of us. And then there are the lucky, and, among the lucky . . . the chosen ones.”

She looks at me then, and she knows who I’m talking about. I say “Just let me do the dirty work, Angel. Ain’t nobody but me, fucking with you.” I pinch her.

“You smoke too much dope, Mojo. One night when you are sleeping, I am going to open your head and eat up all your genius. Then I will do the job. You know who I will be?”

She says I could be a prophet, but it’s obvious I haven’t got her compassion. I’ve always been this way. It has always been this way for me. I had my chances.

Before Tamar came from Trinidad, I’d wanted the three rooms of her apartment for myself. Her Aunt Addie almost rented them to me for a song. I needed one room for some large canvases I’d been working on, a room for a mattress away from the funk of my chemicals, and a room to eat my meals in and write letters to my little girl who’d just been taken far from me to some place I never heard of in Mississippi. “There is a chance,” Aunt Addie said, “that someone will come after all for these rooms.” We stood in one long room, at a window overlooking the west side of the city. Across the street was a small deli and a laundromat and then rows of boarded up store fronts covered with spray painted declarations of love and other hostilities. I liked

the view. Behind the row of short buildings, the sun was disappearing into a line of tall sumacs, ghetto trees, or what Tamar would tell me were really ailanthus. A familiar landscape; I had an appreciation for it. The sun is beautiful to me when it's backing away from colorless streets.

But then it was confirmed that Aunt Addie's niece was coming, and I thought, "All the way from Trinidad to live in three big empty rooms by herself." But I was thinking of how I would keep them and not of how a woman might keep them, and certainly not of how a woman like Tamar might keep them having no imagination for starkness and no intention at all of being alone. I moved a mattress and my things into the room Ms. Addie offered me, which was like every other place I'd ever lived—cramped. I didn't have to look far to find what I already knew about myself.

Which is what Tamar said when she first set foot in my room. "Are you suffocating in here?" she asked.

"No," I said, "I do have a window."

"No view," she said, "a brick wall. Small space, small thoughts. You too smart for this."

"How do you know how smart I am?" I asked. It was then I figured that she wasn't so innocent as she looked. Like a woman, she knew how to bring a man down and build him up in one breath.

"You a sad man," she said. "Why?" She had her hands stuck deep down in the pockets of her dress, this colorful, poofy thing that made her look like she was about fourteen years old.

"You don't want to know me," I said. "I'm a life taker."

She laughed at this. "All man is a life taker," she says. "That is why there is woman. You will come paint by my window, right?" She had already cleared some space for me.

But she could see that I wasn't getting any real work done, and I never pretended to be inspired by anything but the sight of her, basically. She sat across the room from me in a big sink chair one of her uncles had brought over for her. She has a younger sister, still in Trinidad, who she used to sit and watch play the piano like this.

"I'm not making music," I said. "Come closer."

"No," she said. "I got a big concept of what music can be."

"Lady," I said, "I'm glad to hear that. Come closer."

From the beginning, I wanted Tamar.

I had no expectations. I've never held on to a woman for very long. What my last woman said was that I had a brain but no tenderness. What use was I to her? I had some trouble even with my little girl, who was only content with me when I let her into my colors. Once I spread a big canvas over the floor, put her in a bathing suit and let her dip her hands and feet in cans of paint. By the time her mother came to pick her up, she was a sordid rainbow from head to toe. But her eyes were brighter than at least I'd ever seen them. This won no points with her mother, who believed it was an attempt on my part to make a mockery of my own child, some life I had no control over. In the end, maybe it was better that she moved my baby away from me. I read somewhere that small children remember best those experiences most saturated in color. So I thought that while my own life was fading, my daughter, in her memory, might associate me with something brighter.

Now I spend my afternoons painting beside Tamar's dog, Marcus, who she named after the Garvey man. His company is no substitute for Tamar's, but no matter how hard I try, I can't keep her in bed with me in the mornings. She's been promoted at the Eat 'n Park to salad bar manager, so she makes it out of bed by 7:30, stretches her body for thirty minutes in this way that is so beautiful, I even crawl out of bed to watch her. Then she is at the window saluting the sun, whether she can find it in the sky or not. She says, "You could greet the world with me," but I am content knowing that at least she has it in her. "Baby," I say, "watching you is about as close as I'm gonna ever get to prayer."

By 8:45, she's wrapped in her green polyester apron and out the door, and I'm left to feed Marcus this nasty food that I argue is no good for him. But, of course, Tamar cannot understand this, not being the one around in the afternoons when the old dog is slobbering and farting every five minutes, something it seems he only feels comfortable doing in my presence. He sleeps on my feet, and I don't give a shit that he's almost seventeen. I'd kick him hard if Tamar didn't inspect him every evening. "You will be good to him," Tamar says. His profile at the shelter read something like, "Give this loving dog a home. His master died, with no surviving relatives." Tamar says, "Do you believe that? The woman die and someone bring the dog in. The man at the shelter believe it was the woman's son. A young man, you know, got no time to take care of some living thing his mama loved. It is like me in Port-of-Spain. When my black daddy is around, everybody love me. But as he said, as soon as he go dead, I am too black to be around." She squeezes her hands

together on the rare occasions when she talks about her family still in Trinidad. Lately, she has taken to stroking Marcus fast and hard. I say to her, “just think how fast they would have pushed you away if you had farted and slobbered all over the place.” She doesn’t laugh.

I cook for Tamar, because she doesn’t nag me. No, that’s not true; I cook for her, because this is her place, and I’m almost always out of work. It’s okay, though. I mean I don’t feel too bad. I keep a few customers, good people from around the way who want quantity and won’t trust the herb you get on the streets to take them where they wanna go. Plus, I’ve got a lady who’s sold a couple of paintings for me. An old professor of mine from the Pittsburgh Art Institute, who’s opened her own gallery in Shadyside. She wants to maybe give me my own show, but she’s not sure what my statement is. Once we went to have coffee down at Eddie’s Diner. Chumps eyeing me and this white woman dressed in eggshell wool, brushed gold hoops. “What’s the message behind your madness?” she says. I’m eyeing the young brothers staring at us, and it’s like this grand white dame doesn’t even feel it. “I’m going down,” I say. “That’s my message.” And I laugh and drink my coffee, center my eye on a particular young brother who’s leaning out of a booth. “I’m going down,” she says. “Can you elaborate on that?” The young brother looks at me, looks at the woman, looks at me. “You got a problem, my man?” I holler a little ways across the room.

“Recognize,” he says. “You know.” His head is down laughing, his eyes focused on his opened palm. When he looks back up at me, his mouth has settled into this punk smugness. I figure in his circle, he must be what Tamar would call a bad john. But that’s not what I’m about. I don’t start shit. “Why don’t you go play a song or something, my brother,” I say. I look away from him, because the lady is staring directly at me. She won’t look to her side, and I don’t blame her. It’s a good thing though that I know young punks, and I know that when this chump goes down, no one else is stepping up. He hauls his little stringy ass over to the booth behind us, bends over the seat and sniffs the woman. I don’t even take my eyes from hers. I reach across the table and grab a palm full of plats, pull him off his seat, kick his stringy ass back into his booth in the corner. His boys just look at me. “Man,” Eddie says, from behind his counter, “Mojo you don’t need to come in here.” He doesn’t pursue it; he turns his back and continues drying orange juice glasses. The lady doesn’t hear me the first time, but she finally stands and lets me lead her out of the diner. Her eyes look no where but toward the door.

Outside, she gets into her Saab, a supreme burgundy, clean as hell for January in Pittsburgh. She starts the car up, and her music begins. I'm glad for this—to see her face settling into something familiar. She rolls her window down and looks over her shoulder back at Eddie's. "Mojo," she says, "I feel like that was some kind of demonstration. What was that all about?" I don't answer her. What we talk about is art. What she thinks she can sell. I need to put a little cash in Tamar's pocket. That's all this woman needs to understand. "I thought I'd show you a couple of things," I say, "back at my place. I've got more space now, and I've got some larger canvases."

"I'll call later this week," she says. She turns her music off, leans back in her leather cushion and looks at me. "I've never seen anything like that," she says.

"Yeah, well you must not get out much," I say backing away from the car. "Look, it's January." I turn and head up the street and think about how I didn't need that little exchange. I figure I should have known better than to take her in there, and I pray word doesn't get back to Tamar. But it does, I guess, in some way or another. She is already aware that I'm not all saint while she is away. She comes home every once in a while and drops these little tidbits of worry in my lap. Finally she sees that I've got nothing to say about it. I am who I am. She kisses me and can taste that I'm all sour inside. She steps back and questions her faith in me and then shrugs her shoulders and sucks in her beautiful cheeks.

But she has trouble with this thing that happened at Eddie's. One day in the middle of one of her favorite meals, she puts down a forkful of baked pears and asks me if I know whose child that was who I hurt in Eddie's. She looks at me with her large round eyes and then at my plate as if nourishment might help me with the answer.

"Child," I say. "Boy, I'll give you. I don't like you using the word 'child' in this situation."

"Of course you wouldn't," she says, "but that's how I feel, and I said it. And I don't care whether you like it or not. That's how I feel."

I look at her, but she begins eating again, and her eyes fall only on whatever portion of food she's taking in. She's said this to ruin my dinner. She's attempted to slip something like guilt into my meal, and is waiting like a child, herself, to see me swallow it. What I do is walk away. I go for a walk that becomes a night, and when I come in the next morning, she is asleep on the couch, no blanket. I want to breeze by her, hole up in the room we made

my studio, silent until she's wrapped up in her apron and out the door. I could do this. When she leaves the apartment, I could still be gone.

She's heard me though; I can see her eyes moving under their lids. And she says without opening her eyes, "I forgive you. I forgive you for that boy." Then she's still, so still that I want to shake her. But instead I get a blanket and cover her, which is not thanks for her forgiveness. I'd beat the little motherfucker's ass again if I had to. But I do it just because she's Tamar and my woman for a time. And doing this is the least I can do for her. She is always good to me.

The next night, I make chicken in a spicy peanut sauce. It simmers on the stove, and next to it is my blend of mashed potatoes . . . butter, potato, yellow squash, fresh ground pepper.

"What's the vegetable?" Tamar asks. She has lifted the lid off my chicken, and is inhaling tendrils of spicy steam. Before I can answer, she has pulled a perfectly round tomato from each of her green apron pockets.

"Tomatoes are fruit," I say. She looks at each one of them curiously, like she wonders if they'd like to speak for themselves.

"It is for color," she says, "and juice, a little red juice for our plates."

I nod at her to agree that our plates could use this color. I'm lying on the couch with *Time* magazine open, the cover boasting some understanding of "The Agony of Africa." I've just smoked a joint, so I'm feeling pretty good. Tamar moves toward me smiling, coming to touch me . . . we haven't touched each other in over a day. But it's her purse that she's coming for on the coffee table right in front of me. She pulls an envelope from her purse and drops it between my legs.

"I want you to read this," she says. "At first, I'm really upset about it, but now, I am just wondering."

"What is it?"

"Just read it; we talk about it over dinner."

"But that's Jeopardy time," I say.

She grabs the TV remote and switches the set off before running for the bathroom.

Dear Tamar:

This letter is being written by someone who feels sorry for you. Well, I shouldn't say that. It sounds bad, but it's true. And once I say why, you'll know that you need to make a change in your life.



I have been watching you. Everybody watches you, because you are a good woman and because nobody wants to see a young woman come all the way from the West Indies just to make a fool of herself. You come here to make your life better. You work hard. You attend classes. Your family owns some property, so you have a good inexpensive place to stay. So much going for you. You set up a nice home for yourself, and then who do you invite in? The Devil. You think he is smart with his proper talk and his art diploma. He is not smart. I see him buy drugs from the lowliest people on the street. You think it is good that he will kick and punch a man and walk away like nobody seen it. You think he has respect, because people nod their head to him. They are afraid of what they can't understand. No one can understand him, except for I guess the white women I see him with, the white women I see him bring to your apartment. Do you check your sheets? He is a devil. I hope you know that the devil you live with killed someone.

Sincerely,  
Someone who cares

I am making a ball of the letter, when Tamar comes out of the bathroom and hollers, "No!" Marcus looks up from where he is lying in front of the book shelf. He looks at me, not at Tamar running across the room in her underwear.

"It is mine," she says. "I didn't give it to you to ball up."

"When you give it to me," I say, "when you put something like that in my hands, then I must destroy it."

She sits on the couch, with her elbows pointing outward, her hands planted on her thighs. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see her staring at me. She reaches over and grabs the balled-up letter from my hand. But I grab her wrist, and hold onto her the way I'd hold her if she were falling over the side of a cliff.

"If I believed you were really angry," she says, "then it wouldn't be so bad if you balled up my letter. But you ball it up, not 'cause it hurts you. You ball it up, 'cause you think you can get away with anything. You ball it up, 'cause it gives you a chance to roll off some silly line. I'm not listening to that going down bullshit, tonight. Don't look at me like that . . . Mojo . . ."

The phone rings and she moves to answer it, but I release her wrist very slowly. And I don't take my eyes from hers until she says, "You don't scare me man," and reaches behind the couch to grab the telephone receiver.

"This is not over," she says. "Hello . . . eh, girl. I am living. You know a woman live much with a crazy man."

She glares over at me. Tamar believes that I go out of my way to fuck with her, and she is right. I believe a person grows weary of positive experiences. But a woman like Tamar. A woman like Tamar can store negative energy and then convert it. Boom.

"No girl, the man is damn harden, I cannot say a thing to him."

It is her friend, March, on the telephone, who came from Trinidad three years before. The two of them only speak for fifteen minutes every week, and their whole conversation revolves around me and March's man. Since March's man, Jeffrey, is my herb connection, I guess March didn't write the letter. That is unless she has decided her man is the lowliest person on the street. The shit wouldn't surprise me.

"Dinner is ready," I say. I put my pan of peanut chicken on the table. I'm not rushing Tamar off the phone. Well, yes I am. This is some business she didn't tell me about the night before. Maybe she was thinking she'd slip the letter beside my dessert plate. Tamar knows something about strategy. And maybe this night and the night before are just the beginning. Which pisses me off. I wish she'd just get to the point. I had always hoped her going would come like a punch.

"Dinner is ready."

She rolls her eyes at me.

"See you girl. I got class tonight . . . yeah, girl. Let me get back to you on that."

"So what about it?" I ask, as she comes off the phone.

"You been standing in that same position for the last five minutes," she says. "I hear you say dinner is ready."

"So what about it?" I say again.

"You didn't even set the table," she says. "Mojo . . . where are you?"

"What about it, Tamar? What about it?"

She glares at me and seals her lips. Her silent punishment.

I turn over the table. Marcus jumps up and is barking in every direction. But I stand cool and calm as if the table has just turned over by itself. Tamar stands, and she is calm too, staring down at Marcus whose bark is shrinking with his body back to his position before the book case.

She looks at the chicken all over the floor and then at my bare feet as if there is some connection, until she is past me, running across the long room, heading towards the back room. I follow her, because I can't imagine why she would run into my studio at this time. But I hear paper shredding before I get to the door. She is grabbing sketches from my work table and ripping them in half.

But this I will not let happen. I am prepared for her to call me every son-of-a-bitch in the book. I'm even prepared for her to tell me that she hates me, which is something that Tamar has never said. That would be fine. I could love her without her loving me. I would deserve that. But these sketches of her are all that I will have when she is gone. All of them sketches of just Tamar. I grab her wrists, and she twists and tries kicking me in the balls. But I take her leg and pull her hopping around the table. She wrenches free and dives onto the table, where she grabs sketches and crumples them. I try to grab her hands, but she has many arms, her legs kicking my sketches everywhere. I climb up on the table with her, pull her into me and straddle her hips from behind, her arms still flailing. When I grab her arms, she falls back into me, still suddenly, like her system has just gone down. But she breathes heavily and I can see her jaw stretching. We sit there together, the paper still settling and Marcus' bark dying.

"You know," she says, "I have been wanting to believe that you are no bad john, but I am not so sure."

"No," I say, "I am no bad john."

"Yes, you are," she says, "you are just a bad john, sitting around waiting for someone to come kill you."

"Tamar," I say, "don't start this shit. This is not Port-of-Spain; this is America."

"So," she says, "that makes you a stupid bad john, because you have opportunities that the bad john in Port-of-Spain does not have. Instead, you turn over tables. Kick men down stairs."

"What about you?" I say, "tearing up my sketches."

I am still holding her to me, her wrists locked together.

"It's okay for you to destroy, right?"

She is lying hard into me, smelling like radishes and musk. And it is not that the beat of her heart has slowed and her breath has cooled, it is that she is between my legs, and if we were tied to the tracks with a locomotive less than three feet away, this would feel good. So I lick the back of her earlobe,

release her wrists and run my hands down the insides of her thigh. And my hands are almost beneath the cotton when I realize she isn't sighing but saying softly, "Get off me." She moves away from me then, but not fast.

"Mojo," she says, "when you go to touch me like that and what you were just a minute before was all insanity, it scares me."

"Tamar, Baby," I say, "I adore you . . . and you don't need to be afraid of me."

"You never hurt a woman?"

"I adore you," I say.

Which is not something she's trying to hear. She brings her legs into her chest and rests her chin on her knees. Everything, every line of her body comes together.

"You're right," she says, "I'm not afraid of you. You are not enough to put fear in me."

"Tamar," I say, "my job is not to put fear in you."

"Go away," she says, "I got enough of you in my head to think about."

"No," I say. "It's Port-of-Spain you got in your head. Not me."

"No, it's you, now" she says, unfolding herself. "What is in your head but some nonsense some people tell you to make you think you at the edge of the world about to fall off?"

I don't respond.

"And what am I to do when you are my first friend here and this is all I hear from you?"

"Are we friends?" I say. "Is that what we are?"

"It's not a bad word," she says. She moves and the table creaks, which is a reminder to me that we're both grown people who have trusted this table, built for flimsier things, to hold us for a time.

"I had another friend once who was an artist," she says. She has a snide smile on her face, as if, for her purposes, she is about to change the characters of some morality tale she grew up with.

"Oh no, Tamar," I say, "don't go there, baby."

"No, no," she says. "listen, okay. This is true." She is hurt, and she closes her eyes in this tired way and says nothing, until I touch her.

"What?" I say. "I'm sorry. I wanna hear."

"Okay," she says, "he was just a friend. He made costumes for people to wear at carnival time. Beautiful things. He could turn you into whatever you want to be."

“Did you sleep with him?” I ask.

“What has that got to do with a thing?” she says, “I emphasize that he was just a friend. You listen, now, he was an artist, and he made a lot of people happy, and he deserves respect. One day driving in his car, he hit a boy, seven, and flips the boy over the roof of his car. And he stop, and he see the boy’s face, before the family come for the boy. And he see the boy again at the hospital, where my friend goes for a crushed rib and a broken nose the boy’s family give him. And he tell me he could never understand dead until he see it on the face of someone so young.”

“They locked him up?” I say.

“No,” she says, “they say it is not his fault. The child ran in the street, and my friend was not driving fast. But he make his own punishment. He can make a person into whatever they want to be. And he see this boy’s face, and he think it is somehow important to mold what he see with his clay, so at next carnival, he is head to toe this boy. And he think the whole city will be so happy to see this child alive again.”

She moves her feet over the side of the table and looks back over her shoulder at me.

“Anyway,” she says, “I told him not to go out looking like that. He make me up to look like the Queen of Hibiscus that year, but I would not walk with him looking like that boy. Do you blame me? Am I to blame? They beat him simple, and now he don’t know me anymore.”

Then she is silent but looking at me, while I’m looking away from her.

“Tamar,” I say, “when I told you I was going down that wasn’t what I meant baby. Somebody comes to beat me simple, they had better kill me. They had better make me ‘go dead.’”

“No,” she says, shaking her head, “you are not stupid, and why I tell you this is clear.”

We sit, not moving, no further sounds from the table.

“Not stupid at all,” she says, “but simple maybe. I wonder if you already that.”

I walk Marcus, while Tamar goes to class. Later tonight she says her Aunt Addie and her so-called husband, Roland, will be coming by to handle some business. This comes as a surprise, no forewarning, but the look on her face tells me there is a reason she hasn’t said anything. She gives me a small smile,

and her eyes are wide open and moist with a kind of pleading. "I'll just stay away," I say.

"Are you sure?" she says.

"I am sure I can stay away for a while, okay. I'm not so simple that I can't stay away when I need to."

"Mojo."

"Tamar."

"Don't be hurt, okay."

"Handle your business," I say.

Their business is to take some pictures of Tamar and Roland, some proof that they have to provide periodically to show that they are together. Not a problem, I'll stay away. I'm not trying to see Roland's silly ass tonight, and Aunt Addie is already pissed off at me for "jeopardizing" her niece's situation. She has successfully brought over two young family members through similar arrangements, changed their lives. "You don't need to be sleeping there," she says every time she calls for Tamar, "you do got a room across the hall."

So I take Marcus and we disappear. I tie him to a post and walk into Eddie's. I'm hungry as shit, since I turned my supper over. Marcus isn't complaining; the fat fucker went to town on my chicken.

Eddie's is crowded as usual, but it's not the same crowd that used to be in here at night. Young punks have taken over most of the booths. I ask Eddie for a double order of scrambled eggs and toast. Eddie looks at me like he wants to say something. "What's up Eddie?" I say. He hesitates.

"There's a group of young boys sittin' over there," he says.

I turn around and look at the whole row of booths.

"Please don't start no shit with them," he says.

"Hey, Eddie, I don't start anything. You know, the punks better stay sittin' over there."

"They just young, and sometimes I got to throw them out of here my damn self. What I'm sayin' is let me do it. Okay?"

"Yeah," I say, "fine. Make that a double cheese omelette, please, with biscuits."

I see a man who I know from high school at the end of the counter. He waves at me and surprises me by moving down to sit by me.

"What happenin', Mojo?"

"Not much, Tinny," I say shaking his hand. I remember he got that nickname because it seemed like he wore braces forever. This nickname no longer

applies, and I wonder how a brother so young and hopefully sane could just let his teeth rot out like that. He starts talking about his woman, and I realize he just needs a face, some hair, some brown skin. I could be any brother. The man isn't even eating, but I listen. "Um, hum" in between mouthfuls of omelette.

"Tinny," I say, finally cutting in, "do you remember when I killed that boy?" He looks away from me, like he's caught somebody's reflection in the mirror behind the counter.

"Yeah," he says, "I remember, Mojo. Everybody remember that."

"Everybody?" I say.

"Ah man, you know." He still hasn't looked back at me. "I guess everybody remember it, but don't nobody be thinkin' 'bout it. Why you thinkin' 'bout it man?"

"Oh, you know," I say and look at Tinny like he's a fool. "It comes into my head from time to time."

"It was just an accident, Mojo, man. One of them freak accidents." His head goes kind of sideways, so that he's staring at my knee.

It was freak, alright. No sense to it. The boy standing there right outside of a diner like Eddie's. Chewing on a hot dog and in between laughing at the shoes I'm wearing. Laughing at any woman's body who walks down the street. Laughing at the way the street light shines down on another boy and makes his face look greasy. Me, I just want to get him away from my spot. Just want to get his silly ass away from me. So I push him real hard, so hard that he slams into a parked car. And when he's lying there with his head down, we think crying because his head is all fucked up, though this is the case too, the boy is choking on a piece of hot dog. It's over before somebody turns him over. It doesn't take long. And you know when something like this happens, when you are responsible for something so wrong you know that this is probably what was in the works for you from the very beginning.

"Anyway, Mojo, man," Tinny says, "look like you got it going on, man."

"What do you mean by that?" I ask.

"Oh, you know," he says, "Mojo, you the man."

"Not everybody thinks so," I say and then I regret telling Tinny any part of my business.

"Mojo, man," Tinny says chuckling. "A man got two sides. The side he shows these motherfuckers out here and the one he shows his woman." Then he launches into this sermon that takes me right back to Tinny as a young

boy, on the playground, on the back of the bus, talking about some pussy everybody knew he never had.

I get the check from Eddie and lay some cash on the counter.

"I'm a go get a drink, man," I say. "Care to come?"

"Ah nah, man, thanks," he says with a small smile, "got to get home and apologize I guess. Do right before you do the do? You know how they like it."

One thing good about Marcus is that he's still got a thick heavy coat. Another thing good is that he's so damn old, he can sleep and fart for hours under a street light if the weather isn't too bad. I spend a couple of hours at the Name of the Game, shoot some pool, lose twenty dollars and then head home. When I walk in the door, there's a soft calypso beat playing. Tamar is sitting on the couch, bent over, reading something on the coffee table.

"Hey man," she says, "did you have something to drink?"

"Jack Daniels," I say.

"You look high," she says. "Are you feeling good?"

I hear the toilet flush.

"It's Roland," she says, calling for Marcus with her hands.

"Alright," I say, "I'll walk around the block. He's leaving right?"

"He's leaving," she says, "but don't be silly. Sit down here. Aunt Addie has left some fried plantain for you. Everything is fine."

Roland comes out of the bathroom, and he seems embarrassed. He stops and looks behind him to see if where he had just been was real, if what he just completed was a real thing. And now, here he is in the room with me, confronted with the memory of my whooping his ass the last time we saw each other. He is a big man. The last time he was here, he tried to come off like he wasn't no chump. But I treated him like one, and the idea of that has to still be fucking with him.

"Hey man," he says, "how you, man?"

I don't say a thing. I'm looking at two Polaroid pictures on the coffee table. Tamar and Roland sitting close to one another.

"What's that one?" I say pointing to a third picture I see sticking out from underneath my *Time* magazine.

"You can see them," she says, handing me this picture of her sitting on his lap.



“They’re for immigration,” she says. “You know.”

I watch Roland come across the room, real fast, too fast for a sane person, and he extends his arm to me.

“Man,” he says, “I owe you an apology.” I ignore his hand, but take this picture from Tamar. The smile on her face, with her arms around her husband, is uncomfortable. She wanted me to see this.

“Roland has something to say,” Tamar says. “Can you listen to him?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I say. I look directly at Tamar, not at the fool standing in front of me.

“I owe you an apology,” Roland says, “for the last time I was here. Man, I was in a bad way. I, uh . . . nothing like that won’t ever happen again.”

“Why is he telling me this?” I ask Tamar. We’ve got this triangle of vision going on . . . me looking at Tamar, Tamar looking up at Roland, Roland looking at me.

“Man, I just thought . . . I just was trying . . . ”

“He’s not a bad person,” Tamar says as if the brother isn’t even in the room, “he is like everybody; he made a mistake. He is not like everybody; he tries to make it right.”

“Do I look like Jesus?” I say. This makes him back away from me, and he turns to Tamar and says, “I’m out.” He shakes his wife’s hand goodbye, and Tamar holds on to him for a minute.

She walks him through the hallway to the door and returns much faster than I expected. She moves through the room in her peach sweater and blue jeans, no shoes or socks on her feet. The plate of plantain she carries into the kitchen and then returns for the Polaroids. She gathers two of them up and takes the one of her sitting on her husband’s lap from my hand without looking at me.

“Are you not speaking to me now?” I ask.

“I’m speaking to you,” she says.

“What do you want to say to me?” I say.

“Oh, Mojo, what person could know what to say to you.”

“Tamar,” I say, “I’m not like you. I told you from the beginning. I’m not in a position to offer anybody forgiveness.”

“It could have been a mutual exchange,” she says and looks at me. She stops long enough that Marcus thinks her stillness is as an invitation to be near her.

“What I thought,” she says, “when I first come to know you is that you a sad man grieving, that all your talk is cause you just so sorry for killing that boy and don’t know who to ask to forgive you.”

“That’s not what I told you, Tamar.”

“No,” she says, “I cannot wait for you to tell me what it is. You are locked in one moment in your life. When you was just a boy, you push another boy down like you is somebody, a man. But he go dead down there . . . he don’t get back up. And you don’t look at him. You don’t remember his face do you?”

“No,” I say, honestly, and she looks away from me.

“Well, Mojo,” she says, “no wonder you can never look another man straight in the eye.” She moves then across the long room and Marcus, on his last legs, follows.