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BOOKS BY WALTER MOSLEY
PUBLISHED BY POCKET BOOKS

Devil in a Blue Dress

A Red Death

White Butterfly

Black Betty

A Little Yellow Dog

Gone Fishin'

WALTER
MOSLEY

BLACK BETTY

AN EASY RAWLINS MYSTERY



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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY FATHER, WHO DIED ON NEW YEAR'S DAY, 1993.

I MISS YOU, DAD.

GATOR GREEN

EASY?" Bonnie's voice came from the kitchen window. "Yeah," I said.

I was sitting in a maple chair on the concrete apron that spread out around our back door. I'd just started Jesus's advanced sailboat-building book. It was going to be his reading assignment for the next three weeks and I wanted to make sure I understood it before he and I started our lessons.

"There's a man at the front door."

"He want you or me?" I said in an unfriendly tone.

"Easy."

She was outside now. All I had to do was turn around and I could see her. But I didn't turn. I pretended to go on reading even though the words had turned into squirming worms across the page.

"He wants to talk to you," she said.

I put Juice's book down on the chair and stood. I stared straight ahead, childishly avoiding her gaze. She touched my arm as I passed her. She always touched me when I was close enough. Especially lately, when I was so upset that I couldn't even sleep in my own bed.

"WHY YOU SLEEP in the livin' room, Daddy?" my adopted daughter, Feather, asked when she came up to me one morning and realized that she couldn't watch cartoons on the living room TV set.

"I been restless," I said.

"Why don't you go to a doctor?"

"There's nuthin' the doctor got for this."

I must have sounded sad because Feather put her little golden hand on my neck and sat over me until I fell back to sleep.

"MORNIN', MR. RAWLINS," the small white man hailed. He was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

"Saul," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Got a little problem I thought you might help me with."

"Would you like some coffee, Mister . . . ?" Bonnie asked.

"Lynx," the man told her, "Saul Lynx. And yeah, I'd love a little java in a cup with some milk."

Saul Lynx was a private detective. He and I worked a case that he started and I took over some years before. When I first met him I didn't trust him. I didn't trust many white people. But as it turned out he was okay. It wasn't until some time later that I found out he had a black wife and three children as light as Feather.

"What's up?" I asked, herding him into the living room.

"That your wife? She's beautiful."

"Bonnie Shay. She lives here with us. Now what is it you want, Saul?" It was Saturday and I was tired from a hard couple of months of work—both on and off the job.

My son, Jesus, had dropped out of school but I was still teaching him every evening; making him read to me and then having him explain what he read. My lover, Bonnie, had admitted that she'd gone away to Madagascar with an African prince who was trying to liberate the continent. She said that they slept in separate rooms but still I couldn't bring myself to kiss her good night.

I had been slipping back into the street in spite of my respectable job as supervising senior head custodian at Sojourner Truth Junior High School. In less than three months I had investigated arson, murder, and a missing person. I had also been party to a killing that the police might have called murder.

But worst of all, I had found out that my best friend in life was definitely dead. Raymond Alexander, Mouse, had died trying to help me. There wasn't a place in my mind that I could turn to for hope or a laugh.

THE COFFEE WAS ALREADY BREWED. Bonnie brought Saul his cup and I led the way into the backyard carrying a maple chair for him. We sat side by side looking up at the enormous shade tree that dominated half the yard.

"Good coffee."

"Yeah," I said. "She can burn."

Saul gave me a questioning glance and then he smiled. He was a small man who always wore brown. That day it was cotton brown trousers with a brown, blue, and green sweater that had an argyle pattern on the chest. He was also wearing tennis shoes, so I supposed he was on a job.

Saul had a big shapeless nose and a face you would forget two minutes after you saw it. But he had emerald-colored eyes that Hollywood starlets would have paid a hundred thousand dollars to possess.

"I have a cousin-in-law named Ross Henry," he said.

"Don't we all." I was responding to his tone more than his words.

Saul laughed.

"I've missed you, Easy."

"Ross Henry," I said.

"Yeah." Saul put his cup and saucer down on the deck and leaned forward, clasping his hands. "Ross is a good kid, man really, he's thirty-seven. But . . . he never learned how to make it in the white man's world."

I grunted and Saul grinned again. He lived among black people and understood the humor in his words.

"But it's worse with Ross," he said. "He had an argument at work with his boss which led to a scuffle. He broke the bossman's nose."

"Then it's lucky he lives up here," I said. "'Cause down in Mississippi they just might have strung him to a tree."

"Not so much Mississippi as it is Louisiana." Saul shook his head.

"Say what?"

"Eggersly Oliphant," Saul said. "Known to the world as 'Gator.' He owns and operates a six-lift garage down on Lincoln, near the beach."

"Six lifts." I was impressed.

"Not only that. He owns a small used-car lot across the street and a motel two blocks down. Oliphant is president of the Santa Monica Board of Commerce and a power broker in local politics. A northern Dixiecrat."

"Ross broke Gator's nose?" I asked.

"No. Gator's tough. Very much so. It's his cousin, a runty little man named Tilly. Tilly called Ross a name that white men shouldn't use on black people and then he picked up a ten-pound monkey wrench. Ross figured that he had a reason and that the difference in size was made up for by the steel.

"I'd have to agree with the brother on that," I said.

"Maybe I would too," Saul agreed. "But Ross went overboard. He kicked Tilly when he was down and made him lie there while he bad-talked him."

“So now Ross is in trouble with Tilly or with Gator?”

“Gator. Well, really it’s with the SMPD.”

“For assault?”

Saul shook his head. “Robbery.”

“He robbed him?”

“No. They fired Ross on the spot. That night the garage safe, where they kept the proceeds from a of Oliphant’s businesses, was robbed.”

“And Ross did it?” I asked.

“Gator says so but Ross denies it.”

“But Eggersly is an important man and so the police arrested your wife’s cousin for the job.” wasn’t hard to figure out.

Saul nodded. “It was definitely an inside job. That’s why Ross could even be arrested. Whoever was knew exactly where the safe was and what tools they needed to crack it open.”

“What did they use?”

“An acetylene torch from the car lot.”

“And Ross worked there?” I asked.

“He worked all over,” Saul explained. “Ross is a natural mechanic. They used him wherever they had a need. He could fix the ventilation system at the motel and crack open an automatic transmission for the garage.”

“So the cops have it that he broke into the car lot, stole the torch, toted it over to the garage, and then burned the lock off the safe?”

“Actually,” Saul corrected, “it was an old safe. All the guy had to do was burn off the hinges.”

“How much?”

“Between cash receipts, checks, and past due bills, they reported forty-nine thousand and some change.”

“And all the cops got on Ross is that he broke a man’s nose and then they fired him?” I said. “I doubt if they could convict a man on that kinda evidence.”

“Well . . .” Saul looked down at his coffee cup, hesitating, “it’s not that simple.”

“Oh no?”

“No. You see, when Ross was younger he was arrested for assault and robbery. They even convicted him but all he did was six months.”

“Why?”

“It was a dispute he had with a bartender on Central. He had fixed up a TV on a platform so they could play the baseball games at the bar. Ross told the bartender, a man named Grey, that he’d do it for thirty-five dollars, which was his rent at that time. Grey said okay, but when it came time to pay up he said that he had agreed on twenty-five . . .”

There was real feeling in Lynx’s words. I could see that he and Mr. Henry were close.

“Ross fought with Grey, knocked him out and took his thirty-five from the till.”

“And they arraigned him for felony assault and robbery but then argued it down because of extenuating circumstances,” I said, finishing the all-too-common tale.

“There was a woman in the bar, the waitress. She heard the deal and the judge was feeling merciful that day,” Saul said, wrapping up the story.

“So? What he needs is a lawyer. What do you want with me?”

“We got him representation,” Saul said. “But she’s gonna need some help if we want to prove he’s innocent. The problem is if Ross didn’t do it, then somebody else had to.”

“What else they have on him?”

“He was the only one to use the torch. And he was the only one who had access to all the keys.”

except for Gator and his cousin.”

“Why didn’t they take his keys when they fired him?”

“He’d left them at home that morning because it wasn’t his day to lock up.”

“It sure is a mess,” I said. “But what could I do about it that you can’t?”

“That’s just it, Easy. I made the mistake of going over there when Ross got in trouble. I went up against Oliphant and he called me a kike. I didn’t do anything, but let’s just say that there’s no love lost between us.”

“And so you want me to what?”

“He likes people from down around where he comes from,” Saul explained. “Southerners, especially from Louisiana. They got a machinist opening now that Ross is gone . . .”

“I got a job, man,” I complained.

“Yeah, I know. For a favor, Easy.”

It never hurt to have a white man owe you a favor, that’s what I believed. And Saul was a good guy. Even the fact that he was there giving a bad-tempered black man the benefit of the doubt made me want to help him.

And then there was Bonnie and Mouse. Him dead and her —a dead place in my heart.

“Where is this Ross Henry now?”

“We got him out on bail. His mother put up every cent she has for the bond. He’s down in Watts, at his mother’s place.”

* * *

SOMEBODY IN ROSS HENRY’S apartment building had a very bad cough. We heard it from the bottom of the stairs. It was one of those deep, wet, rolling coughs that, in my childhood days, almost always preceded a funeral.

They lived on the third floor of the building, which had been constructed from wood some time before the First World War. The stairs sighed with each step. The colorless paint had separated with the grain of the drying wood planks. The screen door we stopped at was divided into two equal panels. The top screen was as old as the house, rusted and crumbling. The bottom one was brand new, grainy and supple.

The cough was coming from inside the apartment.

Saul knocked but I didn’t think anyone could hear it over that rheumy hacking, so I tried pulling the door open. It was latched from the inside.

I was glancing over to the right, looking for a button or something harder than knuckles to knock with, when Saul said, “Um, Easy.”

Behind the ancient haze of the upper screen I saw a sour-faced black woman with staring yellow eyes.

She coughed.

“I thought you might not have heard us knocking,” I said lamely. “I mean—”

“I’m sick, not deaf,” the woman said and then she suppressed a cough.

“Hello, Clara,” Saul said. “This is Easy Rawlins. He’s a specialist that I’m using to help Ross. How’s your son in?”

Clara Henry was tall and dark. She had manly shoulders and hands that had seen so much work that they seemed too large for her body. She looked me up and down and curled her lip.

“I guess,” she said, and unlatched the door for us to enter. Then she called, “Ross, it’s that white man and somebody for ya.”

The entryway of the apartment was bisected by a wall that separated two parallel halls. Clara Henry

went coughing down the hall to the right. I was about to follow her when a man's voice called out from the other way.

"Send 'em on down."

After about twelve feet the hallway veered off to the left depositing us into a room that had no particular purpose. There was a green couch that doubled as a bed, and a card table used for dining. In one corner there was a sink set upon a small patch of tiles. The rest of the floor was wood so deep rutted and splintered that a mop would have been torn to shreds in any attempt to wash it.

The big man stood up and extended his hand when we entered.

"Hey, Saul," he said.

"Ross."

Ross had orange-brown skin and a thick mustache that didn't stop at the corners of his mouth but went straight back and up until it blended with the hair just above his ears. He had a receding hairline and shoulders inherited from his mother.

Behind him there was a youngish white woman still seated on the couch. Her short hair was brown and styled into a flip. Her nose slanted toward the right which made her seem as if she was standing in profile even when she was looking straight at you.

She had obviously just put on her sweater. I imagined that her bra was under the couch somewhere.

She noticed me noticing her nipples under the thin pink cotton and turned away, smiling slightly.

"And this is Ross Henry," Saul was saying to me.

My heart was doing a kind of double-knocking throb in my chest.

"Mr. Henry," I said.

"Mr. Rawlins. This is Amiee," he said. "She come by to visit."

"Hello," she said. Even her words were sexy. She added, "I better be going, baby."

"No." Ross put out a hand. "No, don't go. I just got to tell these men somethin' and then we can, we can . . . you know, visit."

"Um," Saul said delicately.

"Naw, man," I said. "This business is only between us three. Maybe your friend would wanna wait with your mother."

"Oh no," Amiee said holding up her hands in a defensive pose. She stood up from the couch with a sinuous, snakelike motion. "Some other time, baby."

Getting up on tiptoes she kissed Ross's cheek. At the same time however, she managed to meet my eye with a smile.

She was slight and in her thirties but young-looking, dressed better than a secretary or waitress. She wore no ring.

I had been looking at women lately. Ever since I found out about Bonnie's royal holiday. I'd been looking but I didn't have the spirit to follow up. When I lost the desire to kiss Bonnie it seemed to extend to all other women too.

That's what bothered me about Amiee. Her crooked glances managed to get under my skin. It was hard for me to think about anything more than her sidelong smiles. For that reason I was happy to see her pass out of the door.

"Man, why you wanna go an' threaten her with my mama?"

On cue the hacking cough sounded through the walls.

"Wasn't no threat," I said. "I just needed her out of here so we could talk about keepin' your ass outta prison."

"I'm not goin' to jail, man," he said. "Shit. I'll have my ass down on some Alabama farm 'fore I get to no jail."

Saul met my gaze. He shrugged slightly.

“Your mother put up her life savings against a fifteen-thousand-dollar nut,” I said. “What you gonna do, make her work the rest of her life ’cause you a coward?”

“Motherfucker!” Ross yelled.

He threw a long looping right hand but it was useless because I hit him on the side of the jaw with my left that also blocked his punch.

Ross went down hard on the desiccated floor.

Someone cackled behind me.

Mrs. Clara Henry was standing in the doorway gleefully clasping her hands.

“That’s right, mister,” she said encouragingly. “Hit him again, hit him again. Maybe you hit him hard enough you might knock some sense into his thick skull.”

She even did a little jig. But all that laughing and capering was too much for her condition. She fell into a bout of coughing that brought her elbows down to her knees.

Saul was crouched down next to Ross, who seemed stunned by the mere fact he’d been hit. He was rubbing his jaw and watching his mother’s show.

“Mama, what you doin’ back here?” the full grown man said. “This my room.”

Mrs. Henry recovered enough to laugh once more.

“You show him, mister,” she said to me. “Knock some sense into him.”

With that Ross’s mother went off down the hall.

“I’m gone, Saul,” I said.

“Hold up, man.” That was Ross. “Hold up.”

He stood and held out a hand.

“No hard feelings, brother,” he said. “It’s just that you caught me right in the middle’a the pussy man. I was gettin’ it but when she heard you comin’ she jumped up off me and put on her clothes. Then when you made her leave—shit, I lost it.”

“Are you crazy, Ross?” Saul asked. “Why do you want to have a woman in here when you’re in so much trouble?”

I think I was the first one to laugh. But Ross and Saul followed soon after. We all knew the answer to that question.

“All right now,” I said. “It’s time to talk turkey.” The smiling stopped.

Ross rubbed his mustache and leaned against the sink. Saul sat in the sill of a small window.

“You didn’t rob your boss?” I asked.

“What kinda shit question is that?” Ross said, half rising from his perch.

“You swing on me again and I’ll break that jawbone.”

“No, man. No. I did not rob Gator.”

“Then who did?”

“How should I know?”

“I don’t know, but if the cops don’t have nobody else they gonna give you to the judge. And you and I both know what he’s gonna do.”

“Over twenty-five guys work for him,” Ross said. “They come and go all the time. Must be a hundred different people know about the safe and that torch.”

“How many of them have access to a key?” I asked.

Ross winced and turned his head away.

“How’d you come up with the money for Amiee?” I asked.

“What you mean?”

“She’s a prostitute, right?”

“Man,” Ross said. “You just wanna get your ass kicked, don’t you?”

“She’s your girlfriend?”

“Today,” Ross replied. “Maybe not tomorrow.”

“Lemme see your wallet.”

Ross turned to Saul but only got the shrug.

You could see around Ross’s eyes that he was in his thirties. But in his heart he was still a young man, barely out of his teens. That’s why I treated him like a child.

He took out a black wallet that was maybe ten percent leather and the rest paper. He had a driver’s license, a library card, and three dollars. Under the secret flap he had a two-dollar bill that had the upper right corner torn away to avoid the bad luck associated with that denomination. If he had robbed a safe of thousands of dollars his wallet would have been stuffed with cash—I was sure of that.

“You do much reading?” I asked him.

“So what?” he replied.

I handed him the wallet and asked, “What kind of job could I get if I go down there?”

OLIPHANT’S GARAGE was an ultramodern auto repair and body shop. Everything was chrome and concrete, glass and white paint. The gleaming cylinders for the hydraulic lifts were well oiled and flawless. There was no trash or built-up grease in the corners. The mechanics wore dark-blue coveralls.

There were white men and blacks working together. If I was unemployed this would be the first place I’d look for a job.

“Can I help you?” a red-headed kid asked. He was no more than fifteen, with a big friendly smile on his face. I felt that I’d met him before but put that down to his engaging manner.

“Lookin’ for a job’s all,” I said.

“What kind of job?”

“Mechanic.”

For a frown the young man smiled just a bit less brightly.

“You been a mechanic before?” he asked.

“Sure have.”

“I wanna be a mechanic on racing cars,” he said. “Those guys travel all over the world and make real money.”

“I guess they do,” I said.

“You ever work on race cars?”

“I was in a few drag races when I was a hothead down south. I worked on those cars but I’ve never been a professional.”

The kid was looking right at me but I had no idea what he saw.

“I’m learning everything I can here,” he said. “By the time I get out of high school I’ll know everything I need.”

“I wish you luck,” I said, wondering how to get to applying for the job.

“I’m gonna buy a dirt bike tomorrow,” he said. “That’ll be great. I can start to learn about bikes and bike racing. We don’t fix motorcycles here.”

“Do you know if there’s a job opening?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “But it’s not up to me. You see the main office over there?”

He pointed toward a room encased by glass walls. Three men in blue coveralls were sitting around a table smoking and laughing with a big white guy in a green suit.

“Yeah,” I said.

“That’s Gator’s office,” the boy said. “He’s the one in green.”

“Gator?”

“Mr. Oliphant if you want the job.”

I KNOCKED ON THE GLASS DOOR. Gator turned his head in my direction. He took me in for a moment and then gestured with his head and lips for me to enter.

It was a good-sized room with two tables and a desk. The mechanics sat at one table. The other one supported a partly deconstructed car engine.

“Mr. Oliphant,” I said as I stuck out my hand. “I’m Larry Burdon.”

It was one of many names that I typed in as dead or missing during my stint as a statistics sergeant during WWII.

“How can I help ya?” he replied.

The other men took this as their notice to leave. They filed out into the unnaturally clean garage and took up various posts.

“Lookin’ for a job,” I said as they were leaving.

Gator was perched at the edge of his desk. He was as tall as Ross, but whereas Saul’s cousin-in-law was burly Oliphant was long and lean. I didn’t think I could get inside his offense and I wouldn’t have wanted to try.

“For what?” he asked.

“My specialty is heating and cooling but I can do anything mechanical.”

“Oh really? Where you from, Larry?”

“Lake Charles.”

“You don’t say? Some good old boys down in Lake Charles. And they can eat.”

“Blue crab gumbo and crawdad pie to die for,” I said. “Put all that on a plate with some dirty rice and red beans and you will be in heaven.”

Oliphant smiled and a rough laugh escaped his lips.

He would have been handsome except for the pits on his cheeks and throat. In one way he was the exact opposite of Saul Lynx. The tall Cajun had brown eyes and green clothes.

“You know your food but do you know engines?”

“Oh yeah,” I said like they did down home. “Poor man got to know how to fix his car ’cause a place like this cost you a week’s wages.”

Again Oliphant laughed. “If you lucky.”

He picked up a slender stick and tapped the bottom of the engine.

“What’s that?” he asked me.

“Oil pan.”

“And that?” he asked tapping the upper region.

“Injector over the intake manifold.”

“What about down here?”

“Flywheel.”

We went on like that for a while. After I’d named twenty parts of the engine he began asking me how I’d fix various problems. I guess he was happy with my answers. I did know about cars.

“You say you’re a hot-and-cold man but you know your cars.”

“I know boiler rooms and air conditioners too,” I said. Working as the building supervisor I had to know how every machine at a school worked.

Oliphant rubbed his ravaged jaw and regarded me.

“I do have a position open,” he said. “But how’d you know about it?”

“Sam Houston,” I said.

“And here I thought the great man had died.” Oliphant’s smile was somewhat sinister.

“Not the original,” I said. “This one’s from Texas too, but he’s black and owns a restaurant in L. called Hambones. He found out about it somewhere.”

I doubted that Oliphant would go so far as to check my story but I’d already asked Sam to cover for me.

“Last boy to work here didn’t work out,” Gator said. “Broke my supervisor’s nose and broke in the safe too.”

“Was he from Louisiana?”

That got Gator laughing again. He liked to laugh.

“Okay, Larry,” he said. “We’ll try you out. If you can work as good as you talk you’ll do just fine.”

We smiled into each other’s eyes. He had the kind of eyes that made you feel that he knew what was going on in your mind.

TILLY MONROE was the first man I had to deal with. I knew his name from the moment I saw him—though it wasn’t hard. First off he had a bandage over his black-and-blue swollen nose. Then he was short, five five tops. He also wore red coveralls with the name TILLY stitched over his heart. All he needed was good sense and six inches and he could have been a matinee idol.

“So you the new buck?” he said, and I wondered why Ross had waited so long to bust his face.

“Just a mechanic,” I said.

“This ain’t no penny-ante backyard garage here, son,” he said. “This here’s a first-class operation. You get a job and a time estimate and you better believe that you will finish on time and keep your station clean.”

I inhaled through my nose and held it, trying to keep from saying something angry.

“No personal phone calls,” Tilly added, “except in emergency, and no sick pay. You get paid for the hours worked and you work every hour you here. Understand?”

“Yes sir.” I hated myself for saying it.

I was given three engines and told that I had a week to overhaul them for the used-car lot across the street. That way, Tilly said, he could make sure that it was me and not some other man doing the job.

I signed up for the evening shift and worked into the night. It didn’t bother me not being home. Bonnie and I barely spoke but still it hurt my heart to have her near.

I SPENT SIX HOURS there and didn’t find out one thing that would help clear Ross Henry.

Gator was well named. He cruised around the garage like a huge green predator. He had the same kind of evil grin as the alligator and seemed to come up out of nowhere. I met eight men other than Oliphant, Tilly, and Ed. Ed was the kid I met coming in. I don’t remember anyone else’s name. They all worked hard and laughed well. Maybe one of them robbed the safe. It was beyond my ability to tell.

The garage closed at eight that Sunday night. I dawdled around until nearly nine, cleaning up my station.

“See ya, Larry,” Ed said to me.

“Later, kid.”

His bright smile shone in answer and Ed turned toward the door.

“You about finished, Burdon?” Tilly asked me.

When I looked up to see the small man, I saw Gator beyond him, looking at us both through the glass wall of his office. His brow was dark and dangerous.

“Just about,” I said.

“’Cause we don’t want any of the brothers around when we’re not here to watch ’em, if you know

what I mean.” Tilly was standing nearly on top of me, which was unsettling because I was down on my knees putting my tools into an iron chest.

I stood to my full height and Tilly fell back, one step and then another.

“Didn’t that man who stole your money break your nose for you?” I asked him.

“What of it?”

“Nuthin’,” I said. “It’s just that you should go home and study your eyes and that nose in the mirror. See if you can find a correlation between the two.”

“Corra-what?”

I never expected to return to Oliphant’s garage. Why not give them a glimpse of the man who hid from them in plain sight?

“See you tomorrow,” I said.

I stripped the blue coveralls off of my street clothes and marched out of the mechanic’s glare into the briny night.

ED WAS STANDING on the corner, waiting for a ride I supposed. He was a good kid. Talked a little too much. But whenever he did Gator came out and set him straight without embarrassment. If anybody was going to let something drop, it would be Eddie.

I wanted to go home, to sleep on my sofa. But Saul was a friend and I had made a promise. So I went to the corner thinking this would be my last stab at getting information on the robbery.

“Hey, Ed.”

“Mr. Burdon.”

“Goin’ home?”

“Yeah. My mom’s coming to get me. I won’t get my license for three more months. Then I can drive myself. You need a ride?”

“Yeah, which way you goin’?”

“Up to Sea Breeze, but my mom can give you a ride anywhere around here.”

I had no idea where Sea Breeze was and I had my own car. I just wanted to hang around Ed until he answered a question or two.

“They say the guy I’m replacing broke old Tilly’s nose,” I ventured.

“Sure did,” Ed said. “Ross is a good guy and that Tilly’s just mean. He don’t like black people too much, you know. He’s from the South.”

“So’s Gator,” I said. “You got a little twang there yourself.”

“Ah yeah, but Gator’s great. He’s my dad.”

No one had mentioned this during the day. But it made sense once Ed said it. I thought Gator was looking out for him because he was the only kid at the place. But thinking about it, Gator wasn’t just being a boss, he was being paternal in a cold sort of way; like the lizard he emulated.

A white Cadillac pulled up to the curb.

“That’s my mom,” Ed said.

The car door opened and a woman said, “Come on now, Eddie. I got to—”

She didn’t finish her sentence because I turned and she saw my face. She was looking straight at me but her face still seemed to be in profile. That grin still thrilled my heart.

“Hey, mom,” Ed said. “This is Larry Burdon, the new mechanic. He needs a ride.”

“Easy?”

“No, it’s Larry,” Ed corrected.

“Oh.”

Amiee came around the side of the car to shake my hand. She grabbed onto two fingers, squeezed, and pulled.

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Burdon. You look familiar.”

“That’s funny,” I said. “So did your son when I met him.”

“Mr. Burdon did the best of anybody on dad’s test,” Ed was saying.

We were looking into each other’s eyes. I was ready dive in, right there.

“You don’t have a car, Larry?” Amiee asked.

“I took the bus, Mrs. Oliphant,” I said. “I live a ways up, near Sepulveda.”

“I’d be happy to give you a ride.”

As I climbed into the car I looked over at the garage. The lights went out just as I turned and so I couldn’t be sure that I glimpsed Gator standing in the glass door, staring in our direction.

We dropped Ed off at the Oliphant’s front door on Sea Breeze Lane. Then Amiee drove off in the opposite direction from my fictitious home.

“I was surprised to see you,” we both said at the same time.

“Twice,” she added.

“You mean when I came up on you in the clutches with Ross?”

“No,” she said. “When I saw your handsome face come in that room.”

I was a full-grown man, forty-four at that moment. I had been on three different continents and seen everything from birth to death many times over. With all that experience one would think that the slip of a girl with an uneven face would hardly even make an impression. But Amiee had my heart fluttering and my mouth watering to the point where I had to swallow.

She smiled at my discomfort.

“What’s goin’ on, Amiee?”

My question had extra meaning as we were pulling into a parking lot that bordered the Pacific Ocean. The low-slung three-quarter moon sent a corridor of light rippling from the horizon to the shore, not twenty feet from our car door. The moonlight and that woman filled my chest with awe.

“You working for Ross?” she asked me.

“After a fashion. You workin’ on him, or with him?”

“I was just giving him a little justice,” she said.

“Justice?”

“I told him that I knew he didn’t rob Gator but all I could do was to give him the secret knowledge that he had the bossman’s woman before he ran.”

“No wonder he was so mad when we interrupted you.”

Amiee smiled and gestured at me with her jaw.

Only that morning I thought that I’d never kiss another woman.

We wrestled around for a minute or two. Her hands were quick and clever. I felt every hormone and instinct in my body surging but still, I took Amiee by the shoulders and pressed her back against the door—at arm’s length. Not daunted by the distance she pressed a bare foot against my erection and smiled.

“No,” I said.

“Not yet,” she replied. “But it’s comin’.”

“No,” I said again. “It’s not.”

Amiee composed herself then accepted my refusal without anger.

I felt a powerful urge to jump out of the car and run back to Bonnie. I wanted to tell her something but I had no idea what.

“I’ll never forget you, Easy Larry,” Amiee said.

“Why’s that?” I asked in a voice much deeper than usual.

“I never had a man frustrate me twice in the same day.”

We both laughed.

“You still need a ride home?” Amiee asked. She leaned over to give me a half-friendly kiss.

“Naw,” I said. “My ride is a couple’a blocks away from the garage.”

“You gonna tell me why you workin’ there?”

“To see if there’s some other explanation for the robbery.”

“You find anything?”

“Nope.”

“But you’re there to help Ross?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“For a favor to Saul. That’s the guy I was with.”

“What if I told you something?” she said. “I mean, could I trust you to keep secret where you heard it from?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I don’t know how to prove it.”

“Oh I’ll take your word, honey. I can feel how much you wanted me and still you held back. Some woman has made an honest man outta you.”

Her words seemed to be full of meaning.

“Any man that true,” she continued, “will keep his word if he can.”

“All right,” I said. “You got my word. So what can you tell me?”

“Gator and Tilly are movin’ stolen sports cars.”

“From the used car lot?”

“Uh-uh. They work on ’em late at night and then sell ’em from off the street.”

“How so?”

“They get the car in and paint it, then they leave it on some corner and send the buyer the key.”

“How long they been doin’ that?”

“Couple’a years.”

“And was Ross in on it?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And how do you know about it?”

“Eggersly don’t give two shits about me. He got at least two girlfriends at any one time an’ he ain’t hardly ever home. When he is he treats me like a piece’a property. He brags about what he’s doin’ like I wasn’t in the room. Talk about women he had, men he beat, and the cars too. Gator always says that he was born poor white trash but he was smart and tough and made somethin’ outta himself. But my mama always said that you could put trash in a silver ashcan but it’s still just trash.”

I’d known men like Oliphant. Men so proud of their strength and their accomplishments that they forget even the greatest fighter can be stabbed in the back.

“So you think Gator or Tilly knows who stole the money?” I asked.

“Not himself. He wasn’t in there that night, ’cause it was Tuesday. On Tuesdays he drops Eddie off at Little League practice and then goes off. Nobody sees him again till Wednesday.”

“So what does that mean for Ross?”

“Ross don’t know none of it. He don’t know that most nights Tilly and Gator up in there with stolen cars. How’s he gonna be so smart to pick the one night you can be sure nobody’s there?”

It was a good question.

“YOU DIDN’T GET IT? What the fuck is wrong wit’ you, Easy?” Mouse asked.

It wasn’t really Mouse but just a specter in my mind. Lately, whenever I was disturbed or distressed, I’d start telling the story to the air and from somewhere in my mind I’d imagine my dear friend’s opinions.

“No,” I said in the empty car. “No. I haven’t set things straight with Bonnie yet.”

~~“Lemme get this straight, Ease. She had her hand down in your pants, had a hold’a yo’ dick, and you still pushed her off?”~~

“Yeah,” I said on a heavy sigh.

And there was no reply. It was new ground for Mouse and me. What could he say? There was no experience he’d ever had with a friend who would have said such a thing.

I PULLED UP INTO THE DRIVEWAY at about eleven. The lights were on. Bonnie was sitting in the reclining chair reading and waiting for me. Her recreational reading was mostly in French. I’d always felt that was a barrier between us, like her French-speaking African prince.

She put the book down when I came in.

For a while after I found out about her holiday she tried to act normal. She’d smile at me when I came through the door and kiss me the way she always had. But after a few weeks of me being cool and turning away she stopped pretending.

“Easy.”

That’s all she said, just one word, and I wanted to put my fist through the wall.

“Hey, baby,” I said instead. “What you readin’?”

That threw her off guard. She was about to say something else but those words never came out.

“A book,” she said. “Nothing. It’s about a young girl in love with a man who doesn’t even know that she’s alive.”

I pulled a wooden chair up next to the recliner and sat down.

“Just because somebody loves someone else that don’t mean she got to love him back,” I said. I was hoping for better words to come out; words like she’d been reading in that novel.

Bonnie wanted to say something but all she could do was reach out and touch my cheek.

“I was mad at you,” I said. “I wanted to take my love away from you ’cause I thought that’s what you did to me. And maybe it is. Maybe you love somebody who don’t know it. But all I know is that you’re here with me, inside me. And so I wanna say that you can go off now or tomorrow or next month. You can go have that life you read about and I will let you go. And . . .” I was talking from a place inside me that I didn’t even know was there; saying words that had been worked out in a part of my mind that I was unaware of. “. . . and you can leave knowin’ that I love you. It doesn’t matter if you love him or don’t love me. It doesn’t matter what you did or wanted to do. I’m not mad at you anymore. And the good feeling from my lovin’ you is stronger than the pain of seein’ you do what you got to do.”

As soon as those words were out I felt like a fool. My ears got hot and I expected Bonnie to laugh in my face. But she didn’t laugh. Her hand fell down against my chest and pressed. Whether it was a caress or pushing me away, I didn’t know.

“You wanna come to bed, baby?” she whispered.

“Not tonight,” I said. “I got things to think about.”

“What Mr. Lynx wanted you to help him with?”

“Yeah. Tryin’ to help his cousin stay outta jail.”

“Okay. But will you come back to bed when this is over?”

“If you still want me.”

Bonnie’s eyebrows furrowed and her hand moved away. She kissed me on the cheek and left without saying another word.

I laid back on the sofa and for the first time since before Mouse had been shot I fell instantly asleep. It was a place beyond images, way past normal, everyday rest. It was the kind of sleep that you fall into after surviving a high fever or grave illness. It was the healing sleep of infants and wi-

animals. My dreams, if there were any, were shapeless and feral notions far beyond any small problems of humankind.

When I awoke early the next morning it took a few minutes for me to remember who I was and where. It was a new world and a new life opening up for me. And I was ready to challenge the world.

BUT FIRST I had to go to work.

I was there early prowling the school, looking hard for unlocked doors or broken windows. I found an overturned trash bin on the upper campus. Instead of making a report for one of my custodians, I opened a hopper room and got myself a broom and dustpan. I had almost finished when the principal came upon me.

“Good morning, Mr. Rawlins,” she said.

“Principal Masters,” I said.

It took Hiram Newgate shooting himself in the head to make me call him principal.

“Is sweeping in your job description?” Ada Masters asked.

“When I used to go to school down in Louisiana,” I said, “the last thing we did every night was sweep, dust, and pick up the classroom. Wasn’t any slot in the budget for a janitor. If you see a mess you take care of it if you can. How else a child or an employee gonna learn unless somebody sets the example?”

Mrs. Masters’s smile beamed. That’s how my luck ran. Under the previous principal I couldn’t do anything right. But since Masters had come she only saw me in my best light, even though I had lost my way and spent many days away from work on made-up illnesses.

“How are you, Mr. Rawlins?” she asked.

“As near to bliss as a poor man can hope for.”

Again she smiled.

I SPENT THE DAY checking between the cracks, making sure that my school was in tip-top shape.

Mrs. Plates called in and said that her husband had died that morning. It was no surprise, he’d been bedridden for years, but she was still broken up.

The students had put up an art show down the main hall of the arts building. Some of those black children had real talent. Portraits and landscapes, abstractions and stories about the good life of being young. Most of them would end up trading in their paintbrushes and watercolors for janitors’ brooms and mail sacks.

There was one painting of me. It was a full body portrait. I was wearing my herringbone jacket and pointing the way to a small boy, probably First Wentworth. I was pointing on ahead and looking in that direction. There was a smile on my face, my teeth were showing.

“You like it, Mr. Rawlins?” Nora Dewhurst, the art teacher, asked.

“That’s somethin’ else. Who did it?”

“Starla Jacobs. It’s her first attempt with oils. You know, she’s a natural painter. See how she made the paint thicker in your face and hands. I think she knew intuitively that that application would make the portrait come to life.”

It wasn’t the person I saw every morning in the mirror; not the hard-knocks black man from the Deep South. Not my jawline exactly. But it had my spirit and my style. She caught the pride in my eyes from being able to help a young boy make it on his way. It was the Easy Rawlins they knew as Sojourner Truth.

“You think she’d take seventy-five dollars for it?” I asked.

Nora Dewhurst had blue-gray hair. Her eyes were nearly clear with just a touch of blue to them. She

was close to retirement, had taught in Los Angeles public schools since 1926. But her eyes bulged with such surprise that you'd think no one had ever purchased one of her students' paintings. —

“Mr. Rawlins, I don't know what to say. You would make a painter out of Starla if you were to do such a thing.”

“She's already a painter.”

“You know what I mean.”

And there we were, a black man from the Deep South and a white woman from New York City, both aware of how little chance those kids had. We didn't quite say it because neither of us wanted to know what would happen if we let the truth out of the bag.

“Tell her to put a matte board around it and I'll pick it up on Friday after the last class.”

Nora kissed me on the cheek. Two little girls standing nearby gasped and ran away.

THAT EVENING I was in my car, down the street from Oliphant's garage. I'd parked next to a va concrete wall, far away from any streetlamp. And I sat low so that any passing cruiser wouldn't see me watching.

Redheaded Ed came out at eight-fifteen. He wheeled a small motorbike to the corner. Five minutes later Amiee drove up. She opened the trunk and Ed put the bike in.

Everybody but Tilly and Eggersly had gone by nine. At ten they were still in there. They were playing cards, throwing down money and pulling from the deck.

Just past eleven a yellow Porsche drove up to the garage door and was admitted. Fifteen minutes later a red sports car pulled up. It must have been European because I didn't recognize the make.

After that Tilly Monroe put up ten-foot opaque screens in front of the glass doors. That didn't bother me though. I had already scoped out a building behind the garage that had a fire escape. I made my way back there and climbed up halfway between the second and third floors. From there I had a night bird's eye view through the skylight.

There had been two men in each car. By the time I reached my perch they'd donned blue coveralls and covered the floor with a heavy tarp. Then they put up clear plastic tents around the cars. Tilly was already taping the chrome.

I decided at that moment I should take a class in photography.

The yellow car turned a dark green while I watched.

They were just turning their attention to the red car when a police cruiser pulled up to the door. I smiled. The job was being done for me. Any lawyer could punch holes in Oliphant's story about Roy if he had been arrested for painting stolen cars.

But it was just a friendly visit. The police came in and conversed with Oliphant while the red car turned white. They received an envelope and a handshake and went on along their way.

Two of the thieves were rolling up the tarp and washing off the spray-paint nozzles by the time the cops left. The other two were shining powerful lamps on the newly painted cars. I watched them clean and dry while Tilly and Gator went into the glassed-in office and smoked.

The thieves were through with their work by three. Three of them drove off in the stolen automobiles but one walked away.

He went over to Pico and turned east. I followed him for two blocks, taking one-and-a-half steps for every one of his. When I was right behind him he turned his head to the side.

“Don't turn around,” I said. “Unless you want I should shoot you.”

I pressed the muzzle of my .38 in between his shoulder blades and took out his wallet.

“You robbin' me?”

The short, white car thief sounded surprised. I guess he figured that a man committing a crime was immune from being held up. Like a first-class passenger thinking that his plane can't crash.

“Oliphant sent me,” I said.

“What for?”

We had stopped walking by then. We were standing there at the corner, two men on a short line t nowhere.

“He wants his money or your blood,” I said, reading the name on his license, “Mr. Tremont.”

“Then what you take my wallet for?”

“To see if you had one of his thousand dollar bills.”

“He had thousand dollar bills in there?”

“Don’t try and play me, man,” I said. “Just gimme the money and I bust your leg. That’ll make all even.”

“I swear I didn’t do it,” the thief cried.

“Step over here, out of the light,” I said.

Alan Tremont did as he was told. We walked into the entryway of a bank building. He tried to turn around but I cuffed him on the ear, saying, “Eyes front.”

He started trembling then.

“Please, man. I didn’t do it. I swear I didn’t do it.”

“Then why Oliphant put me on you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“Gimme somethin’ then,” I said. “Gimme somethin’ or I blow out the back’a your head.”

“I wasn’t even there, man,” Alan Tremont said. “I wasn’t even in town. We had a line on a car down in San Diego. Me and Pete did.”

“I’m goin’ to see Pete right after I kill you.” I wanted to put my intentions in plain language. Simple terms are often the most frightening.

“I can’t prove it, man. If you think it was me and Pete what, I mean . . . Listen, I got thirty-s hundred dollars I been savin’ up . . . I could give it to you.”

I paused for a moment, letting him think I was considering the offer.

“I could get it for you tonight,” Alan said.

“Who do I hang it on then?” I asked.

“You could just say that I got away from you.”

“Better to have the man who did it. You say it wasn’t you, right?”

“No. But I don’t know who did it. All I know is that it wasn’t me and it wasn’t Pete neither. We weren’t in town.”

“Then who?”

“It could’a been anybody. No one was workin’ that night and we all knew it. That was Tuesday and Tuesdays Oliphant spends with Thana Jamieson. Nobody works if Oliphant ain’t there.”

“Who do you think though, Alan? ’Cause you see, boy, I got to kill somebody. I’d like your money but I got to kill somebody or else I got to take Eggersly out. ’Cause if I don’t get you he bound come after me.”

“Maybe it was the one they said. Maybe it was the, the colored guy.” He almost said “nigger” but held back due to the cast of my own words.

“He’s out.”

“Then Tilly’s your man,” Alan said. “Tilly hates Oliphant. He’s always talkin’ behind his back. He’s been fuckin’ Ollie’s wife for over a year. He does it on Tuesdays, when Ollie’s with Thana. Tilly stole it if anybody did.”

“Okay. Okay. You know the Farmer’s Market up on Fairfax and Third Street?”

“Yeah.”

“You know the Du-Parr’s restaurant up there?”

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