

Xyla

WHEN I WALKED onto the dance floor that night at The Mission, wearing the blue dress with white polka dots, Patrick said, “When I saw you I thought you had just stepped out of the sky.”

I thought he was too handsome to be so corny, but I just said, “The polka dots make me feel like I’m being sprinkled with smiles.”

He said, “All I know is they sure do work for you.”

And four months later he asked me to marry him.

We had our first baby a year after that. A girl. She didn’t last an hour, and I nearly died along with her. Second child, another girl, came about a year and a half later. This poor thing lasted fifteen days before she left us. Two weeks and a day and she already had enough of this world. Couldn’t say I blamed her. I didn’t almost die this time—not from anything gone wrong in my body, anyway—but I wanted to die. I was still young: twenty-two. But I felt like my spirit had turned to stone and was dead, even if my body wasn’t. Patty didn’t want to name this one. But I named her, and me and her and God are the only ones who will ever know her name.

Crazy thing about me and Patty—Patty, especially—is that we’ve always had so much hope. He always said, “I love you like you can’t imagine.” And he did. And we had another baby—a girl. We named her after Patty’s great-grandmother. I was twenty-five.

Nothing and nobody have ever been more precious to me. Little baby girl with crinkly soft black hair and big ole cheeks looking and smelling like juicy plums. I never saw a spirit so beautiful.

Ever since I was a little girl I liked to draw, and so I was always drawing pictures of the baby. Patrick would try to make her hold still. But of course she *wouldn’t* hold still, and Pat trying to make her always had me cracking up. Xyla, too. I swear she knew what she was doing, even as a tiny baby, making us crack up like that. Girl had mischief in her eyes, like mine.

When Lily was six, I came into the bathroom one morning to find her standing at the mirror, smearing Vaseline all over her hair. Girl’s eyes could barely see over the sink, and she was getting grease everywhere. All over her school clothes.

“What you doing, baby?” I asked her.

Lara looked up at me in the mirror and smiled.

I picked up her greasy hands by the wrists and said, “Stop it, honey.”

“I’m trying to make it smooth, Mommy,” she said. And then she told me how one of her little friends at school told her to ask her mama—me—to take her to the beauty salon to get her hair fixed, but if she wouldn’t—if *I* wouldn’t—then she should try spreading grease on her head.

“Your hair doesn’t need fixin’, baby,” I said. “It’s already perfect. Why do you want to do that?”

“I knew you wouldn’t take me to the salon,” Selma said, pouting. “You and daddy never want to spend no money. That’s why I didn’t ask you.”

I could’ve almost cried.

When I saw Patty later on I said, “Where did she get that from? We always tell her we love her. I know she isn’t the only girl at school with natural hair. And my nieces . . . I thought she looked up to her cousins.”

“She idolizes them,” said Patty.

“Apparently not.”

“You’ve seen her walking around the house with a pillow case strapped to her head.”

“What? I didn’t know that *that* was about *this*.”

“Well, how old were you when your mama started relaxing your hair?”

He stumped me. I didn’t speak for a moment, because I was thinking.

“But that ain’t the point,” I finally said. “*She* ain’t never seen me with anything but my own God-given hair.”

“Your hair ain’t exactly nappy, baby,” Patty said. “She got the worst of it.”

“Don’t say that!”

“That’s not what *I* say. But you know how people is. Anyway, you’re a bit of a skillet blonde yourself, baby.”

I gave Patty a mean look.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’m just saying she sees things. She’s six but she ain’t blind. She sees.”

A few nights later, we heard Harriet crying in her room. Patty went in and I followed him, and when he turned on the light and saw her lying there in the bed, her little body all twisted up in the sheets, eyes

all swollen, he went and grabbed her up in his arms. She cried louder. Big, ugly sobs—too big and ugly for such a small, young thing.

“What’s wrong, baby?” he said.

She could barely get the words out: “I want to get my hair fixed. To make it pretty.”

“Aw, baby. *Shh*. You’re so perfect the way you are, don’t you know that?”

“I’m not. Can’t Mommy just take me to the beauty salon? Or buy the one in the box and do it in the sink at home? Why *can’t* she?”

Patty just gave her a tight squeeze and looked up at me.

I was standing at the door. I looked back at him, with my eyes saying, “What’re you looking at *me* for?”

When she finally went back to sleep, me and Patty argued about it. He surprised me. He wanted me to just give in and give her what she wanted.

“It can’t do no harm,” he said, hardly sounding like he believed what he was saying.

I exploded. “It can’t? It *can*! It will! Who’re you kidding? And since when did we teach her that being pretty mattered?”

“That’s easy for a beautiful woman to say.”

“*She* is beautiful! She’s *beautiful*. And even if she wasn’t, since when did we tell her that being pretty meant having straight hair? No, no, no, honey. I’m not messing up any daughter of mine. Not this young. Once she gets to be eighteen she can decide what to do with her head. But till then, no child of mine that I made is going to get her hair ‘fixed.’ *Why*? So she can run her fingers through her hair? Naw, darling, I don’t think so. Let ’em get stuck.”

Patty just looked at me and gave me that smile of his that said, “I’m not going to argue with you on this anymore. Can we lay it to rest?” And right away, that look of his—so sweet and knowing—it sent me way back to a day we were all hanging out at J.J.’s place on the river, before it got tore down and before Marjorie was even a thought. Me and Patty were sitting on the dock, our feet in the water. That’s what we liked to do on sticky yellow evenings like that, go down to J.J.’s and listen to the music, feel the music. His arm was touching mine, hot, damp, but I liked it. I just wished he would put it around me already and kiss me with that beautiful mouth of his. His mouth . . . oh, Patty had a beautiful mouth on him . . . And if I hadn’t’a been so mad, right then and there I would’ve . . .

Real soon after that, Olivia got real quiet about it and I thought she had made her peace. About a week later, I came home from work to find Pat's mama just leaving the house. She sometimes picked Jazmine up from school and stayed with her till one of us got home, but I wasn't expecting her that day.

"You leaving already, Mama?" I said.

"I'm afraid so!" she said.

She was walking real quick, and I hardly had a second to look her in the eye.

"Just remember to be happy!" she shouted to me as she was getting into her car. Then she drove off, leaving me standing there feeling curious. Why wouldn't I be happy? I was thinking.

Patty gave me a kiss when I came in, but I wasn't impressed.

"What's that funny look on your face for?" I asked.

He just smiled at me.

Anyway, you can probably guess it by now. I called for Karen, and a few seconds later, into the living room she walks, cheeing ear to ear, her thick, beautiful, crinkly hair now a glossy little bob. It looked like a helmet. I could feel my eyes grow hard and my nerves tighten from the bottom of my feet to the top of my head. The girl could tell it, too, because at first she was walking all slow and sly, like she had managed me, and then all of sudden she ran up to me and threw her arms around my waist.

"Don't be mad, Mommy!" she said.

I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I just looked down, hardly believing what I was seeing.

"Don't be mad, *please!* Grandma took me to the beauty salon where she goes. She said you would come around and you would like it. Please, Mommy! Feel it!"

Patty was standing at the other end of the room.

"Say something to your daughter," he said.

But I couldn't say "something." I was standing there, not believing that they would go behind my back like that. And I must have been standing there for a long time, because I didn't even realize the moment when Delia left off me and left the room with her daddy.

I still didn't say nothing to him that night in bed. I didn't sleep. Somewhere around two, I got up and went to the kitchen. I got the scissors, then went to Bell's room real quiet. I didn't turn on the light. She had a little nightlight in the corner, so it wasn't all dark. When I got

to the bed, I passed my free hand over her head and got chills all over. It didn't feel right. There was a raggedy silk scarf next to her head. Poor Patty didn't know nothing about tying scarves around little girls' heads.

I whispered, "What did they do to my baby?"

I knelt down by the bed and snipped off a big chunk of hair.

"What are you doing?"

The light came on. It was Pat. I looked at him with fire in my eyes, just daring him to come over and stop me. Patty never has been scared of me. When I raised my hand to take another snip, he rushed over and took ahold of me from behind. He picked me up like it wasn't nothing and took me out of the room. I didn't speak a word to him, but I gave him a fight.

My eyes were so foggy from fire and tears that I could hardly see Iris's little face when she woke up. All I could see was that she looked scared as hell. She didn't cry or nothing, but it looked like the fear of God had been put in her. She hadn't noticed yet what I did to her hair.

Me and Patty never did have another baby. Having Josie tore me up good. So she grew up without any brothers or sisters, and I feel badly about that. When she was thirteen she got into a good high school, one of those magnet programs. She didn't have a lot of friends, not like me growing up, but I could tell she was a good friend. She was kind. She ended up graduating without ever having brought home a boyfriend, but I suspected there was someone she loved: this tall, light-skinned boy who would come over sometimes to study. That's what she seemed to like to do most. Study. Caroline was smart. She graduated top of her class and gave a speech on graduation day.

She did good in college, too. And then she did more school after that. Lord knows I missed her when she left. Sometimes I called her.

"How you doing?" I asked.

"Fine, Mama," she said. "How're you?"

"Oh, I'm pretty good. Not much to do in this little one-horse town, but I can't complain."

"How's Daddy?"

"He's good, too. Gives me a new reason to forgive every day . . . He's sitting right here watching the boob tube."

I was trying to imagine what her face looked like when she said, "Fine, Mama." It was always "fine."

"When're you coming home again?" I asked her.

"I don't know," she said. "Don't have any plans."

That was a lie and I knew it, but I wouldn't let myself believe that I knew it. Valerie didn't close her eyes at night without a plan for what she was going to dream. But I let myself believe her when she said she didn't know, because I missed her and hoped to see her again soon.

"You're pretty busy then, huh?" I said.

"No, not really."

"Oh. All right."

Diana worked at a college teaching about politics to kids in their twenties. I guess they were adults, but I only ever heard her call them "the kids." She never did have any real kids of her own, and she never had no man as far as I knew. One time—it was a few days before our birthday—we have the same one—I asked her why she never talked about anybody. She said:

"Who's going to love me, Mama?"

I didn't know what to say, so I didn't say anything. She had said it—*Who's going to love me?*—real short, more like she was spitting in my face than asking a question. She always did have a way of shutting down a conversation. Always seemed like she didn't really want to talk to me either. But this time, she kept talking. Like she was mad.

"You think I like being alone? You think I like going to sleep every night and waking up every morning feeling like there's a big, hurting hole in my chest, Mama? You think I like walking around all the time feeling like I'm dead? You think this is the life I dreamed about when I was a little girl? One day I'm going to die. And when I do, won't nobody be able to say that it wasn't already a long time coming. Won't nobody be able to be sad about it—not if they're being honest—because I already died a long time ago. If you want to be sad because I died, be sad *now*. 'Cause I'm dead already."

The tears were coming down my face before I knew I was crying. Where was this coming from? I know how we raised her. Where was my Xyla? She was upsetting me, and I didn't need it. I wiped my face and made my voice straight, and I said:

"You shouldn't talk like that. I still got some shopping to do for our birthday party. I gotta go, okay? Have you decided what kind of cake you want yet?"

"I don't think I'm coming anymore," she said.

"Well, I hope you'll figure it out soon, please," I said. "We already bought all this food. But we might be able to take some of it back. I gotta go now."

The next time I saw Gina she had lit her hair on fire. It was about a week after our birthday—my sixty-fifth and her fortieth—and a nurse from Washington, DC, where she was living, called me and Patty and told us we'd better come to the hospital. Gina had already been there for two days but had told the doctor not to call anybody. But the nurse, a nice white lady named Joan, had felt sorry for Gina and was worried about her not having anybody there, so she looked in her file and called us on the sly.

By the time I caught a plane to DC, my baby was back in her apartment. She let me in. Not like she was happy to see me, more like she was letting in an old familiar ghost who she knew was going to find a way in anyway.

I took her in my arms right away. She was taller and bigger than me, but I took her anyway, like she was still a baby, and I didn't let go for a long time, even though she didn't put her arms around me and it was like holding up a sack of bricks. On the whole left side of her head the hair had been burned off. She wore her hair natural and kind of short—just long enough to put some twists in—and on the right side of her head it was sticking out every which way like it hadn't seen a comb in a month. She was barefoot and wearing a black silk muumuu.

"Where's Daddy?" she said.

"He couldn't come," I said. "He . . . he wanted to, but he . . ."

"That's all right, Mama. I sinned."

I looked away. I couldn't bring myself to argue with her on that point. I could hardly bear to look at her face either. There was no light in it, and it pained my heart to see it. Even if I could stand to look at her, I wondered if she would let me draw her now.

"Maybe it was an accident," I finally said. "Taking all them pills. It was an accident, right, baby?"

"It wasn't an accident, Mama."

She said it quiet but with such ugliness in her voice that it made me mad. I hadn't come all this way for her to talk to me like that.

"What did you do it for, then?" I snapped back. "Nurse said you took damn near fifty bottles of pills. Then you got crazy and lit your hair on fire. Why'd you do that?"

"Because I didn't take enough," she said. "And I was drinking, too. And because I only live on the fourth floor."

"Stop it!"

Gladys shrugged her big shoulders and fell into the sofa. She stared straight ahead, not looking at anything.

I sat in the armchair next to her and said, in more of a soft way:

“Why ain’t you taking care of yourself, honey? This ain’t good. This ain’t good at all. Your father would be heartbroken to see you like this . . . Did somebody do something to you? Was it something we did? Was it something *I* did? When that nurse called me, all I could think was, ‘Where is my baby? What happened to my little girl? What made her so unhappy?’ Why are you so unhappy, baby?”

Suddenly she looked at me, and there was a flicker of life in her eyes. For a flash, it was like a curtain was lifted and I caught a glimpse of that old mischief that used to be there when she made me and Patty laugh and that always reminded me of the mischief I felt in my own eyes. All in one second, her eyes turned from being dead, to mischievous, to ashamed, to sad, to dead again. And when she said what she said next, then they got mean.

“Don’t you know, Mama?” she said, an evil smile on her mouth. “*You’re* a black woman.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I said.

She rolled her eyes way back and started to laugh. Loud. She laughed till she shook and became so helpless that, apparently, she couldn’t hold up her own head anymore, because it was thrown back and rolling from side to side, and I could see her throat jumping up and down like it had a mind of its own. I crossed my arms and waited for her to finish. She wiped away some tears and looked at her wet fingers for a moment; then, all of a sudden, she straightened out again.

“Mama,” she said, in a soft, quiet voice, “I always knew I was meant to eat the sun.”

“What’re you talking about?” I said. I was still feeling hurt and was ready for her to stop making fun of me.

Xyla looked over toward the window and sighed and smiled. It was a real, sweet, kind smile.

“I was *supposed* to eat the sun,” she said again. Gentle. “*You*, me, *all* of us women. That’s what we were meant to do. We flew down here from in between the stars and were supposed to use the valleys as cups to pour out our love like honey over the whole world. But instead, we get squeezed out from the gaps of their clenched teeth—mangled, bloody, oozing pulp. Not even woman no more. Hardly even flesh and bone . . . When I was born, I could smell the world on the insides of

your eyelids . . . I've got something inside me that was never supposed to be here. I don't know how it got there . . . Don't you know what I mean, Mama?"

She turned her eyes back on me.