

Torn from the Nest

Her name was Maude and she Georgied me around 1921. I was only three years old. Mama told me about it, and always when she did her rage and indignation would be as strong and as emotional perhaps as at the time when she had surprised her panting and moaning at the point of orgasm with my tiny head wedged between her ebony thighs, her massive hands viselike around my head.

Mama worked long hours in a hand laundry and Maude had been hired as a babysitter at fifty cents a day. Maude was a young widow. Strangely, she had a reputation in Indianapolis, Indiana as a devout Holy Roller.

I have tried through the years to remember her face, but all I can remember is the funky ritual. I vaguely remember not her words, but her excitement when we were alone.

I remember more vividly the moist, odorous darkness and the bristle-like hairs tickling my face and most vividly I can remember my panic, when in the wild moment of her climax, she would savagely jerk my head even tighter into the hairy maw.

I couldn't get a breath of air until like a huge black balloon she would exhale with a whistling whoosh and relax limply freeing my head.

I remember the ache of the strain on my fragile neck muscles, and especially at the root of my tongue.

Mama and I had come to Indianapolis from Chicago, where since the time when she was six months pregnant, my father had begun to show his true colors as an irresponsible, white-spats-wearing bum.

Back in that small town in Tennessee, their home town, he had stalked the beautiful virgin and conned her into marriage. Her parents, with vast relief, gave their blessing and wished them the best in the promised land up North in Chicago.

Mama had ten brothers and sisters. Her marriage meant one less mouth to feed.

My father's father was a skilled cook and he passed his know-how to my father, who shortly after getting to Chicago scored for a chef's job at a huge middle-class hotel. Mama was put on as a waitress.

Mama told me that even with both of them working twelve hours a day, six days a week they couldn't save a nickel or buy furniture or anything.

My idiot father had come to the big city and gone sucker wild. He couldn't stay away from the high-yellow whores with their big asses and bitch-dog sexual antics. What they didn't con him out of he lost in the cheat crap joints.

At the hotel one night he vanished from the kitchen. Mama finally found him thrusting mightily into a half-white waitress lying on a sack of potatoes in a storage room, with her legs locked around his back.

Mama said she threw everything she could lift at them. They were unemployed when they walked away from the shambles.

My father tearfully vowed to straighten himself out and be a man, but he didn't have the will, the strength to resist the cheap thrills of the city.

After my birth he got worse, and had the stupid gall to suggest to Mama that I be put on a Catholic Church doorstep. Mama naturally refused so he hurled me against the wall in disgust.

I survived it and he left us, his white spats flashing and his derby hat at a rakish angle.

It was the beginning of a bitter winter. Mama packed pressing irons and waving combs into a small bag and wrapped me warmly in blankets and set out into the bleak, friendless city to ring door bells, the bag in one arm and I in the other.

Her pitch was something like this, 'Madam, I can make your hair curly and beautiful. Please give me a chance. For fifty cents, that's all, I will make your hair shine like new money.'

At this point in the pitch Mama told me she would slip the blanket aside to bare my wee big-eyed face. The sight of me in her arm on a sub-zero day was like a charm. She managed to make a living for us.

That spring with new friends of Mama's we left Chicago for Indianapolis. We stayed there until 1924, when a fire gutted the hand laundry where Mama worked.

There were no jobs in Indianapolis for Mama and for six months we barely made it on the meager savings. We were penniless and with hardly any food when a tall black angel visiting relatives in Indianapolis came into our lives.

He fell instantly in love with my lissome beautiful mother. His name was Henry Upshaw, and I guess I fell as hard for him as he fell for Mama.

He took us back to Rockford, Illinois with him where he owned a cleaning and pressing shop, the only Negro business in downtown Rockford.

In those tough depression times a Negro in his position was the envy of most Negro men.

Henry was religious, ambitious, good and kind. I often wonder what would have happened to my life if I had not been torn from him.

He treated Mama like she was a princess, anything she wanted he got for her. She was a fashion plate all right.

Every Sunday when we all three went to church in the gleaming black Dodge we were an outstanding sight as we walked down the aisle in our fresh neat clothing.

Only the few Negro lawyers and physicians lived as well, looked as well. Mama was president of several civic clubs. For the first time we were living the good life.

Mama had a dream. She told it to Henry. Like the genie of the lamp he made it a reality.

It was a four stall, opulent beauty shop. Its chrome gleamed in the black-and-gold motif. It was located in the heart of the Negro business section and it flourished from the moment its doors opened.

Her clientele was for the most part whores, pimps, and hustlers from the sprawling red-light district in Rockford.

They were the only ones who always had the money to spend on their appearance.

The first time I saw Steve he was sitting getting his nails manicured in the shop. Mama was smiling into his handsome olive-tinted face as she buffed his nails.

I didn't know when I first saw him that he was the pin-striped snake who would poison the core of our lives.

I certainly had no inkling that last day at the shop as live billows of steam hissed from the old pressing machine each time Henry slammed its lid down on a garment.

Jesus! It was hot in that little shop, but I loved every minute of it. It was school-vacation time for me and every summer I worked in the shop all day, every day helping my stepfather.

That day as I saw my reflection on the banker's expensive black shoes I was perhaps the happiest black boy in Rockford. As I applied the sole dressing I hummed my favorite tune 'Spring Time in the Rockies.'

The banker stepped down from the shine stand, stood for a moment as I flicked lint from his soft rich suit, then with a warm smile he pressed an extravagant fifty-cent piece into my hand and stepped out into the broiling street.

Now I whistled my favorite tune, shines were only a dime, what a tip.

I didn't know at the time that the banker would never press another coin into my hand, that for the next thirty-five years this last day would be remembered vividly as the final day of real happiness for me.

I would press five-dollar bills into the palms of shine boys. My shoes would be hand made, would cost three times as much as the banker's shoes, but my shoes though perfectly fitted would be worn in tension and fear.

There was really nothing out of the ordinary that day. Nothing during that day that I heard or saw that prepared me for the swift, confusing events that over the weekend would slam my life away from all that was good to all that was bad.

Now looking back remembering that last day in the shop as clearly as if it were yesterday my stepfather, Henry, was

unusually quiet. My young mind couldn't grasp his worry, his heart break.

Even I, a ten-year-old, however, knew that this huge, ugly black man who had rescued Mama and me from actual starvation back in Indianapolis loved us with all of his great, sensitive heart.

I loved Henry with all my heart. He was the only father I had ever really known.

He could have saved himself an early death from a broken heart if instead of falling so madly in love with Mama he had run as fast as he could away from her. For him she was brown-skin murder in a size-twelve dress.

That last night at eight o'clock Dad and I flicked the shop's lights out as always at closing.

In an emotion muffled voice he spoke my name, 'Bobby.'

I turned toward him and looked up into his face tense and strained in the pale light from the street lamp. I was confused and shaken when he put his massive hands on my shoulders and drew me to him very tightly just holding me in this strange desperate way.

My head was pressed against his belt buckle. I could barely hear his low, rapid flow of pitiful words.

He said, 'Bobby, you know I love you and Mama, don't you?'

His stomach muscles were cording, jerking against my cheek. I knew he was going to burst into tears.

I said as I squeezed my arms around his waist, 'Yes, Daddy, yes, Daddy. We love you too, Daddy. We always will, Daddy.'

He was trembling as he said, 'You and Mama wouldn't ever leave me? You know Bobby, I ain't got nobody in the world but you two. I just couldn't go on if you left me alone.'

I clung tightly to him and said, 'Don't worry Daddy, we'll never leave you, I promise, honest, Daddy.'

What a sight we must have been, the six-foot-six black giant and the frail little boy holding on to each other for dear life, crying there in the darkness.

I tell you when we finally made it to the big black

Dodge and were riding home my thoughts were turning madly.

Yes, poor Henry's fears had foundation. Mama had never loved my stepfather. This kind wonderful man had only been a tool of convenience. She had fallen in love with the snake all right.

His plan was to cop Mama and make it to the Windy. The dirty bastard knew I would be excess baggage, but the way Mama was gulping his con, he figured he could get rid of me later.

Only after I had become a pimp years later would I know Steve's complete plot, and how stupid he really was.

Here this fool had a smart square broad with a progressive square-john husband, infatuated with him. Her business was getting better all the time.

Her sucker husband was blindly in love, and the money from his business was wide open to her. If Steve had been clever he could have stayed right there on top of things and bled a big bankroll from the businesses in a couple of years.

Then he could have pulled Mama out of there and with a big bankroll he could have done anything with her, even turned her out.

I tell you she was that hot for him. She had to be insane over the asshole to walk away from all that potential with only twenty-five hundred in cash.

Steve blew it in a Georgia-skin game within a week after we got to Chicago.

I have wished to Christ, in four penitentiaries, that the lunatic lovers had left me in Rockford with Henry when they split.

One scene in my life I can never forget and that was that morning when Mama had finished packing our clothes and Henry lost his inner fight for his pride and dignity.

He fell down on his knees and bawled like a scalded child pleading with Mama not to leave him, begging her to stay. He had welded his arms around her legs, his voice hoarse in anguish as he whimpered his love for us.

His agonized eyes walled up at her as he wailed, 'Please don't

leave me. You are sure to kill me if you do. I ain't done nothing. If I have, forgive me.'

I will never forget her face as cold as an executioner's, which she was, as she kicked and struggled loose from him.

Then with an awful grin on her face she lied and said, 'Henry, Honey, I just want to get away for a while. Darling, we'll be back.'

In his state she was lucky he hadn't killed her and me, and buried us in the back yard.

As the cab drove us away to the secret rendezvous with Steve sitting in his old Model T, I looked back at Henry on the porch, his chest heaving as tears rolled down his tortured face.

There were too many wheels within wheels, too much hurt for me to cry. After a blank time and distance we got to Chicago. Steve had vanished and Mama was telling me in a drab hotel room that my real father was coming over to see us, and to remember that Steve was her cousin.

Steve was stupid all right, but cunning, if you get what I mean.

Mama, at Steve's instruction, weeks before, had gotten in contact with my father through a hustler brother of Mama's in Chicago.

When my father came through the hotel room door reeking of cologne and dressed to kill, all I could think was what Mama had told me about that morning when this tall brown-skin joker had tossed me against the wall.

He took a long look at me. It was like looking in a mirror. His deep down guilt cream puffed him and he grabbed me and squeezed me to him. I was stiff and tense in the stranger's arms, but I had looked in the mirror too when he came in, so I strung my arms limply about his neck.

When he hugged Mama, her face was toward me, and stony like back there with Henry. My father strutted about that hotel room boasting of his personal chef's job for Big Bill Thompson, the mayor of Chicago.

He told Mama and me, 'I am a changed man now. I have saved my money and now I really have something to offer my wife and son. Won't you come back to me and try

again? I am older now, and I bitterly regret my mistakes of the past.’

Like a black-widow spider spinning a web around her prey, Mama put up enough resistance to make him pitch himself into a sweat then agreed to go back to him.

My father’s house was crammed with expensive furniture and art pieces. He had thousands of dollars invested in rich clothing and linens.

After a week my hustler uncle brought Steve to visit us, and to case the lay-out. My father bought the cousin angle and broke out his best cigars and cognac for the thieves. It was another week before they took him off.

Remember, at the time I had no idea as to what really was going to happen. I would learn the shocking truth only after we got to Milwaukee.

On that early evening when it happened Mama was jittery as we prepared to visit some close white friends of my father. I had a wonderful time getting acquainted with the host’s children who were around my age. Too soon it was time to go home.

In my lifetime I have seen many degrees of shock and surprise on the human face. I have never seen on any face the traumatic disbelief and shock on my father’s face when he unlocked the door and stepped into his completely empty house. His lips flapped mutely. He couldn’t speak. Everything was gone, all the furniture and drapery, everything from the percolator to the pictures on the wall, even my Mama’s belongings.

Mama stood there in the empty house clinging to him, comforting him, sobbing with real tears flowing down her cheeks. I guess she was crying in joy because the cross had come off so beautifully.

Mama missed her calling. She should have been a film actress. With only a bit part, an Oscar a season would have been a lead-pipe cinch for her.

Mama told my father we would go to Indianapolis to friends until he could put another nest together.

When we got to Milwaukee by train, ninety miles away, Steve had rented a house. Every square inch of that house was filled with my father’s things.

Those lovely things did us little good and brought no happiness. Steve, with his mania for craps, within weeks had sold everything, piece by piece, and lost it across the craps table.

Mama worked long hours as a cook, and Steve and I were alone quite often.

At these times he would say, 'You little mother-fucker, you. I'm going to beat your mother-fucking ass. I am telling you, if you don't run away, I'm going to kill you.'

He was just so cruel to me. My mother had bought me a little baby cat. I loved that kitten, and this man hated animals. One day the cat, being a baby cat, did his business on the kitchen floor.

Steve said, 'Where is that little mother-fucker?'

The little kitten had hidden under the sofa. He grabbed that kitten and took it downstairs where there was a concrete wall. He grabbed it by the heels. I was standing (we lived on the second floor) looking down at him; he took the kitten and beat its brains out against that wall.

I remember, there was a park behind our house, concrete covered. There were some concrete steps. I sat there and I cried until I puked.

All the while I kept saying like a litany, 'I hate Mama! I hate Mama! I hate Mama!' And, 'I hate Steve! I hate Steve! I hate him! I hate him!'

For many tortured years she would suffer her guilt. She had made that terrible decision on that long ago weekend.

I know my lousy old man deserved what happened to his goods. I know Mama got her revenge and it was sweet I am sure, but it was bitter for a kid like me to know that Mama was part of it.

Perhaps if Mama had kept that burglary cross a secret from me, in some tiny way I might have been stronger to fight off that pimping disease. I don't know, but somehow after that cross Mama just didn't seem like the same honest sweet Mama that I had prayed in church with back in Rockford.

I went to her grave the other day and told her for the hundredth time since her death, 'Mama, it wasn't really your

fault. You were a dumb country girl, you didn't understand. I was your first and only child. You couldn't have known how important Henry was to me.'

I choked up, stopped talking to her beneath the silent sod, and thought about Henry lying rotten, forgotten in his grave.

Then through my tight throat I said to Mama, 'To you he was ugly, but Mama I swear to heaven he was so beautiful to me. I loved him Mama, I needed him. I wish you could have seen beyond his ugly black face and loved him a little and stayed with him. Mama, we could have been happy, our lives would have been different, but I don't blame you. Mama, I love you.'

I paused looking up at the sky, hoped she was up there and could hear me, then I went on, 'I just wish you were alive now, you would be so proud of me. I am not a lawyer as you always wanted me to be, but Mama, you have two beautiful grandchildren and another on the way, and a fine daughter-in-law who looks a lot like you when you were young.'

The grave next to hers had visitors, an old man and a bright eyed girl about ten.

I stopped my bragging until the pair walked away, then I said, 'Mama, I haven't shot any H in ten years. I haven't had a whore in five years. I have squared up, I work every day. How about it Mama, Iceberg Slim a square? You wouldn't believe it Mama, I wear fifty-dollar suits right off the rack, and my car is ten years old, you gotta believe it now Mama. Goodbye Mama, see you Christmas, and remember, I'll always love you.'

When I walked away from her grave I thought, 'I don't know, maybe that prison head-shrinker was right when he told me I had become a pimp because of my unconscious hatred for my mother.'

I know one damn thing, I can't help crying at her grave almost as if I was crying because I did so much to put her there. Maybe the hidden hate that I can't feel wants me to laugh that she's down there in the earth. Maybe my crying is really laughing.

About ninety days after Steve smashed my kitten Mama cast

off her spell, and one gray April dawn while Steve lay in a drunken, open-mouthed stupor, Mama and I packed what we could carry and moved into a hotel room. It was complete with hot plate and down-the-hall toilet.

Steve had stomped on three and a half years of our lives. I would soon be fourteen.

On the fourth of August, my birthday, our old friend Steve, with diabolical timing, made that event unforgettable. Since that chilly dawn in April he had searched the slum streets for his escaped dupes, thirsty for revenge.

I waited eagerly in the hotel room for Mama who had promised to bake a cake in her white woman's kitchen. She said she would be home early at six o'clock to celebrate my birthday.

Well, she came home all right on the seventh of August, from a hospital, with her broken jaw wired, and her body covered with bruises.

Steve had stalked her and attacked her with his fists and feet and then escaped through the grimy catacombs of the Ghetto.

All that night and all the next day I crouched in the dark shadows beneath his stairwell gripping a gleaming ice pick. He never came back. He had moved.

Twenty years later, while idly looking from the window of a plush hotel suite I would see something familiar in the white-haired stooped figure of a garbage collector on the street three stories down.

I blacked out, when reason returned I was down there on the street in the bright morning sunlight, clutching a pistol, wearing only a pair of red silk pajamas.

As the garbage truck turned the corner a block away out of range, a small crowd of passers-by stood bug-eyed watching the strange scene as Rachel, my main whore, tugged at my arm, pleaded with me to get off the street.

That was the last time I saw Steve, but I just don't know, even now, what I would do if our paths crossed.

Perhaps that beating Mama took was good, as painful as it was. I remember how it worried me in that cruddy hotel room

when the hotel's neon sign outside our window would flash on her face. Her eyes would be bright, riveted on the ceiling, she would be in a trance, remembering, still hot for him.

As worthless as that bastard was otherwise, he sure must have been a son-of-a-bitch in the bed.

After all he had done to us, she still had a terrible itch for the bastard. That beating was good for her, it cured the itch.

Mama had learned a bitter lesson the hard way. The country girl had rolled in the hay with the city slicker and now I saw all of her sorrow and guilt in her eyes.

We couldn't go back to the peaceful, green hills of Rockford. She had destroyed a good man back there, a native son. Henry died a year after we left him. Until the grave claimed her, Henry would rise from his own to haunt her in the lonely gloom.

Mama was desperate to save at least fragments of her image, to hold fast the love and respect I had for her in Rockford. I had seen too much, had suffered too much. The jungle had started to embalm me with bitterness and hardness.

I was losing page by page the fine rules of thought and deed that I had learned in church, from Henry, from the Boy Scout Troop in Rockford. I was sopping up the poison of the street like a sponge.

I had begun to play Steve's favorite game, craps, in the alleys after school.

Dangerously I was frantic to sock it into every young girl weak enough to go for it. I had to run for my life one evening when an enraged father caught me on his back porch punching animal-like astraddle his daughter's head. I had become impatient with the unusual thickness of her maidenhead.