

excerpt

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2.

'missy ann? missy ann!'

where WAS that girl?

it was not only Sunday, but it was the day RaLoux was getting 'christianed', and christy sue had been entrusted by mama to walk to the church with missy ann all by themselves, dressed for occasion. the church was five grassy blocks away, with one turn. christy sue didn't want to walk fast, or heaven forbid, run - that would take away from Sunday elegance for certain.

'missy ann??'

'I'm here christy sue!'

the door slammed too loud and there was all nine years of missy sue, face marked with dust and dirt and mystery and secret, not in her Sunday dress, not with Sunday hair.

christy sue rolled her eyes completely all the way around in her head, turned off the television, and sucked every one of her thirty-some teeth before grabbing missy ann's hand and dragging her through a quick rough process of getting together and elegant.

no use brushing the hair, christy sue just pressed missy ann's hair back into a tight bun full of knots to deal with later. missy ann stayed quiet through the proceedings, her eyes and attention gazed off to some other place.

when they were both finally presentable, christy sue ushered missy ann out the back door so no neighbors would be able to note how late they had left for the church, cutting through the Walters' yard.

when they reached the grass beyond it, missy ann came to a stop so sharp and deep that christy sue looked down to see if there was a pothole in the field.

'missy ann we do not have time for this!'

christy sue grabbed her sister's hands and pulled, no more successful at moving her than if she'd grabbed the branches of yonder (tree).

'christy sue, we'll get...lost...if we go in there.' missy ann spoke in a whisper, as if the yard was going to tell on her.

'missy ann, my temper is going to get lost if you don't come on already!'

pulls and rootedness, snaps and stillness, pushes and depth ensued. christy sue reasoned with missy ann, to no avail. the child would not enter the grass.

'ok missy ann - I am going to see raloux?, our only baby brother?, get christianed, I am going to go now, because mama and god Want me to go. she said we get to go for burgers after if we are good...but you stay here, and I will see you later.'

christy sue turned and stomped into the field, sure that this tactic would work to get missy ann running

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after her like it always did. she stomped with her head high, anticipating the crowd at the church who would see her pretty dress and how her body was starting to get grown.

she finally peeked back to see if missy ann was following, and what she saw brought her to a stop with one foot up in the air. there was missy ann, but the field between them, the empty field christy sue had just walked across, was now bustling with...life.

there were two houses where there had been grass, and yards strung with drying laundry. there were white and black children in dirty gray and cream clothes chasing each other in and out of billowing sheets as black women in high waisted ankle-length skirts and buttoned up shirts added more items to the lines, shouting and laughing with each other.

it may have been christy sue's shocked eyeballs or gaping mouth or suspended foot, but missy ann came running to her then, right through the laundry and the skirt of one woman. the woman turned then and her eyes fell on christy sue and missy ann in the middle of the field.

'well now. you again? and you brought a friend? y'all sent over from walter's?'

the woman was the most smooth, beautiful, slender woman christy sue had ever seen. missy ann having just run through her didn't diminish how real she seemed in that field. christy sue looked around at the field, and it was full of houses, laundry, gardens bursting with greens and tomatoes, children, women and other things, smaller buildings, sheds, a few chicken coops, leashed dogs, -

'can y'all hear? dressed all fancy but no one comes over heah ain't related or workin' so, why you heah?'

'um, we um, we lost.' missy ann spoke with her chin up.

'again? you sure you not sayin that t'get out o' work?' the woman's eyes twinkled brilliantly while her mouth stayed set.

'sorry ma'am, we are lost. we don't mean to bother you at all - we will be going now.' christy sue tried to duck them both back to the yard they had just left.

'and get me in trouble? naw thanks. you grab those two chirrun theah and put them in these heah. whenever theah is a LaRoux christ'nin, we hafta -'

'RaLoux? you know RaLoux??' christy sue was too shocked to catch herself before interrupting.

'uh, *LaRoux* family owns this, all of this, and basically all of us, though we ain't supposed to say it.' A wink. 'that's why we sent for mo help? so. I sure hope y'all will be helpful.'

in spite of everything, something in christy sue did want to help this woman. she turned and looked at missy ann, remembering her sooty face and nappy hair from just a few moments ago.

'lost?'

missy ann nodded vigorously. christy sue did a quick older sister calculation, and deduced that she wouldn't be able to explain this situation much better than that either. she nodded back, and turned to face the woman.

'ok.'

the woman cocked her head.

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'ohhh k?' she smiled. 'sometime later, y'all tell me yo' story. must be for out north. don't get a lot of new workers 'round heah. now...over theah. grab a tomato on your way in, they ready.'

christy sue and missy ann chased after the little white 'chirrun' the beautiful woman had pointed out, who, upon closer inspection, were a little boy and a little girl who seemed utterly comfortable with two black strangers stepping in to get them ready. the four children picked tomatoes off the vine and ate them, juice streaming down their chins and hands. christy sue had never tasted something so bursting.

once inside, the white children didn't want to relinquish their odd underwear, so christy sue decided to just add the other clothes on top of these instead of causing a scene.

once the little ones were dressed, the sisters delivered them to the laundry woman, who nodded approvingly.

'now take them to the front of the house and keep them in the parlor til Master Gray and the Lady are ready to go. follow the carriage down to the church and just make sure those chirrun don't act a fool. check the kitchen after for evenin meal and we'll find a place to bed you.'

the beautiful woman with the laughing eyes turned away, and christy sue led missy ann and the children in through the back door of the house, through the kitchen, up a hallway and into what looked like it fit the word 'parlor'. there was fancy flowery furniture, and dark wooden tables with nothing on them but vases, and a view of the street.

as missy ann situated the children on one of the couches, christy sue peeked through that window. out front were funny cars, really tall with horses in front of them. the street was covered in dirt, and dust seemed to float up everywhere. this street, which christy sue had always seen as grass in every direction, was full of houses. her street, which she'd always thought was country, was smack dab city!

she was turning to tell missy ann about it when two uppity people who had to be Master Gray LaRoux and the lady walked in, wearing the most beautiful and stiff clothing christy sue had ever seen. they were talking to each other in murmurs, and didn't look twice at the black girls, just beckoned the white children over and flew out the door in a flurry of stiff grey wings, skirts, hats and an umbrella.

missy ann and christy sue caught each other's eyes briefly, and then ran out the door after them. immediately the sisters tumbled onto the grass, and when they looked up, the LaRoux family was gone, along with their funny car, and horses, and the houses, and -

'missy ann, I think we back!'

'oh christy sue! we home, we home!! first time I stood by the laundry til the lady told me go get her some water and same thing, like I tripped over time and ended up home. I swear I come right home. but...'

'missy ann, we must talk on it later. on this street? today? we late.'

and without another word, christy sue walked her sister down the re-abandoned block and into the church and they sat their behinds down in the front pew right as the first notes were played for RaLoux's lovely christianing experience. he only cried once.

only after mama laid them into the dark with lullabies, thanking christy sue for doing such a good job getting her and her sister to the church, only then did christy sue take a deep breath on what had happened. only then did she turn to missy ann for a debriefing.

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'that woman was beautiful.'

'those children act like they didn't know how to put on they clothes!'

'but the street was full of houses. full!'

'and those tomatoes were so juicy, did you see how every inch of the yards was food?'

'and laughter...'

'and laundry - they had all they private clothes hung all over the place!'

'but...how did we get there?'

the girls fell quiet at this great mystery. the quiet carried them gently into sleep.

in the middle of the night, christy sue fell out of her bed. at least that's what it felt like, lurching down and finding herself on the ground. but the ground wasn't her warm and wonderful bedroom, it was just dirt.

she looked up and around her, expecting to find a bunch of houses where there usually were none. but this time, she found no houses. as far as she could see there were soft woods and...and...and something like tepees? yes, tepees like she had learned about in school, for the indians.

they didn't look small like in the textbooks - they looked huge and warm and full of shadows.

she was concentrating so hard on being quiet, she didn't hear the walker til he stumbled over her.

she shrieked as she got swept around, but he stayed quiet as he righted himself into a crouch, his hand holding her down on the ground by her throat. he looked her over carefully, and she felt self-conscious in her superman pajamas, her hair coming out of its thousand braids that ended in colored rubber bands.

he spoke to her, but she didn't understand or respond, just lay utterly still as if in a dream.

something got decided, for he picked her up from the ground gently, and then pulled her behind him into the biggest tepee. there, what seemed like hundreds of eyes looked in her direction, none of them making eye contact.

inside the tent, the air smelled smoky and floral and earthy, and felt warm on her skin. all of the faces were brown and wide and beautiful. after a year of silent non staring, a young woman stepped forward.

'you. eat.' the woman's eyes twinkled like the stars outside as she looked just south of christy sue's eyes, and offered up two hands full of food.

the rest of the circle turned back into soft conversation, and christy sue felt as safe as she ever did at her mother's table. she ate the dried meat and bittersweet berries offered to her, noticing the abundance of food being passed around the room, noticing how babies were strapped onto people's backs or laid across their laps, sleeping.

she saw a young man on one side, perhaps the one who had found her, getting his leg wrapped up in leaves. she noticed all of these things as the smoke and warmth and soft murmurs of these voices lulled her into sweet sleep, just like mama's lullabies.

when she awoke, she was back in her bed, in the present, across from a very sleeping missy ann. she smiled. she liked that place from the night, and still smelled the smoke on her pajamas.