

Mensoons



LARAINÉ HERRING

Between Thunder and Lightning

I laid eyes on you again last summer. One day. Some day. The sun was hot, washing over the cotton fields like rain. The air hung like velvet drapes, no breeze, and I sat on my porch fanning myself with an old green church bulletin with one hand, holding a glass of sweet tea in a clear cup with oranges printed on it in the other, when there I saw you, plain as day, sitting in the garden between my rows of tomatoes and cucumbers.

First, I didn't like to believe what I saw. Didn't know what to make of you. You all curled into yourself like a turtle. Your hair was so long I thought it could have been your jacket, but when you shook your head up, and your hair fanned down across your shoulders and down your back, I saw that you weren't wearing anything but skin. You crouched low, chest pressed against your knees, bits of green tomato leaves glowing against your skin.

"Shirley!" I shouted.

Jack heard me from inside the house. "Who you talkin' to out there?"

"No one," I said. "Just myself."

But you were still there, looking at me with all the fire and spark you had when you were living. I'd know you anyplace, daughter. Anyplace.

"Shirley." This time I whispered. "Come on over here and talk to your mama."

But you didn't move, except maybe to stretch out your leg, or to shield your eyes from the dripping sun. You arched your back against the tomato stakes, and I saw how beautiful your body was - young, tanned brown as Sunday biscuits, skin shimmering with sweat.

"Mama love me." That's what you said to me. I can still hear it in my heart. "Mama love me." You said it just like that too. Like a fact. Like something important I'm supposed to instantly know.

"Mama does love you, sweet pea."

“Mama love me.” And you wrapped your hair around your face and hid your blue blue eyes from me. The red earth beneath your feet crumbled into hard chunks that became dust that floated up around you like a shroud. I remembered the day in June a few years back when you jumped into a creekbed that was too shallow and landed smack on your backside in that same red clay. Like to have tattooed that color on your flesh! Mmmm. Made me smile just to remember, lord. Made me smile.

I heard the pipes squeak. Jack must’ve turned on the water in the house. That man was always running the water. He’d take perfectly clean dishes out of the cupboards just to have something to wash. Especially since you gone and left us, Shirley-girl. That man don’t know what to do with himself, so he does dishes. Drove me crazy, but soon enough I just learned to appreciate that someone else besides me was doing the dishes. I wanted to go inside and fetch him -- tell him he had to come outside and see his dead daughter sitting naked in the garden, but I wasn’t sure exactly how a person goes about starting a conversation like that.

Thunder danced behind me. You looked up, waiting for the lightning. You never believed me when I told you that the lightning came first. When you were living, I’d sit next to you on your bed when it got cloudy and you could smell that first hint of damp coming from the west.

“See, Shirley, storm’s coming. You can tell how far away it is by counting between the lightning and the thunder.” You were about eight that night we sat up and watched the storm, you all snug and comfy under your great-grandma’s quilt. “One, two, three...here that thunder now? That means the storm’s three miles away.”

“Is that far?” you asked.

“Yes, that’s far.” I said and stroked your silky hair. But three miles was barely a blip. You went where I couldn’t find you. Not ever. Not until now.

The pine trees rustled me out of my memory. You cupped your

hands over your ears so the thunder wouldn't scare you. You always told me you could feel it rumble in the pit of your stomach. "Like when I eat too much chili, mama." That's what you said to me. Like too much chili.

So hot, there on my porch that afternoon. My blue cotton dress stuck to my legs and arms and sometimes you looked blurry to me with all the sweat pouring into my eyes. Come to think of it, you looked blurry in life to me sometimes too --- always moving so fast, running from here to there, tracking your young muddy feet on my white carpet. Mmm. I like to think of you moving so fast. Tell me, how fast can you move now?

You stood up in my tomato patch. How is it you're here? I reached for you. I wanted to hold you in my arms again, smell the musky scent of your skin, run my fingers over your tangled hair. The wind pushed me back into my chair. Clouds covered the sun. I saw you, standing straight, hair whipping across your face, covering it until I could only see the tip of your nose.

Oh, Shirley, honey, you don't know how much I miss you. Walking around this house now, without you, I just wander most of the time. Make sure Jack's fed and the cat's fed and I'm fed. That's about all, darlin'. Now that we don't hear your giggling from the top of the stairs on Saturday morning. Now that we don't give evil eyes to the little boys who picked you daisies with the roots still hanging from the stems. Now that we don't have anyone to really look at but each other.

Your daddy misses you too, sweet pea, but he won't never say it. It's just not his way. You got to respect that about a person. Your daddy and I are too young, child, to be broken like this.

Lightning cut through the dark sky, and you froze, a startled kitten. I saw your lips forming the words, "One, two, three, four..." and then the rumble came, and you held your hands tight against your belly and closed your eyes.

The night you died was stormy like this. Worse, actually. We were getting the tail end of a hurricane. When I looked out your bedroom

window I saw trees bending every which way, but when I listened, everything was strangely silent. All I heard was the pounding of the rain, the growling of the thunder, and the raspy gasp of your breath. I held your hand as you lay in your bed, your body shivering with fever and cough that the doctor swore to me would break by dawn.

“Pneumonia doesn’t get us anymore,” the doctor told me, handing me a bottle of penicillin, and I lapped up the rhythm of those words.

I held your sweaty hand tight as I dared, and when the lightning broke the dimness of your room, I saw you whisper, “One, two...” and before you could say three, your breath rattled out of your dry lips and you left me.

Your daddy and I buried your ashes in the backyard, next to Murphy, your very first puppy. I planted a cherry tree over top of you both, and I water it every day. Won’t that make you happy, Shirley, darling? To be resting under shade and pretty blossoms?

I shook my head and rubbed my eyes, still unwilling to believe I saw you in front of me. My tears mixed with the first droplets of rain and I felt the steam of my breath hot against my open lips.

“The storm is close, Mama,” you said, gripping the tomato stake.

“Yes, baby,” I ran toward the garden now, not caring that the wind had picked up once again. Not caring that the rain pelted my body with hard cold drops. I fell on my knees, crushing some of my cucumbers. I opened my arms and this time you fell willingly into them. You covered my quivering body with your hair, and your tiny naked arms squeezed my neck tight. You smelled of patchouli oil. “Love you Mama.”

“I love you, baby. So much.” I held you closer, wanting to absorb you into my flesh. Wanting to give you the air from my very own lungs.

Lightning illuminated the yard, and I thought of those too bright too white searchlights those car dealers on Hawthorne Street always use.

You clutched my hair and whispered, “One, two...” and left me, again, sitting in the dark, as the thunder broke me open at my ribs, and the rain poured in and washed me clean away.