

UP!

SHORT STORY*

By Ricardo Cortez Cruz**

(contains samples of program music, "Gangsta's Paradise," and The Baptism)

Every night when the blues around a last quarter are stirring up another death rain and the white lady from the government is through giving away generic cheeses, some black boy with Mezz's roll fingers a nickel-bag of funk and the few dirty quarters he has in his pockets and recycles that same ol' dark rage-shit in the ghetto; with his other hand, the bastard squeezes his nine, shouting "Pop" as his gang walks through a crowd full of negritude. Photographed by a hustling street vendor looking to make money with a Polaroid Captiva, he travels the Tube, the New York City subway, on an unusually warm day in the winter and later marches through the Central Park area sportin' a Starter jacket and an X hat turned backwards with the words "Back the Fuck Up" on the flipside. Only nine years old and already drinking shit, Clay "Yummy" Sandifer is the youth that residents peeking through the drapes call "Satan." "Wherever he goes, there is a trail of blood," they say.

* The fiction "Up" was inspired by the late Ron Sukenick, his novel entitled *Up*.

** Ricardo Cortez Cruz is the author of *Straight Outta Compton* and *Five Days of Bleeding*, novel composition short and funky and with grooves as their only guide. For the record, he is hooked on theorizing in narrative forms, cut and mix style, the rhetoric of sound, writing with corazón, black noise, frictions (fiction and nonfiction scratched into each other), mad flows, and art as "dope" or a weapon. 2nd verse: Cruz's creative work has appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Mandorla: New Writing from the Americas / Nueva escritura de las Américas*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Postmodern Culture*, *Fiction International's Abject/Outcast* issue, *Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review*, *African American Review*, Jabari Asim's anthology *Not Guilty: Twelve Black Men Speak Out On Law, Justice, and Life*, Becky Bradway-Hesse's anthology *In The Middle of the Middle West*, and Kevin Powell's anthology *Step Into A World*, among other hotspots. He has stitched together a third def(t) body of (s)language, *Premature Autopsies: Tales of Darkest America*, remixing and reconstituting himself as if his very lively 'hood—drugged/dragged out—depended upon it. Bonus beats: Cruz teaches English at Illinois State University; he stresses the intimate connection between today's rap and old school.

Every night

His crimeys, the Central Park muggers, hover around female joggers and trash cans in Central Park like vultures. "I'd sell out my best friend," Clay, the youngblood, says to the other five gangbangers that he considers his home slices. He smokes a Kool as they pound a red, white, and blue basketball down the long walks where the graffiti is sidewalk talk created out of Black English, put on thick, and made to bleed.

Every night

The oldest members of the gang, Jorge and Nat Jr., ages 20 and 21 respectively, school Darkseed about being down with the family; he's their little star. "We shared hoop dreams, NBA Street 2, before we turned to playing against each other in park-ball, drinkin' 32-ounce bottles of O.E. but only noticing the Old on those muthafuckers 'cause we was always fighting over bricks and shooting," they tell Darkseed. "Here [they point at their hood], you got to be bad(d) to live to thirty-something," they say, nasty spit in a rush to get out of their mouths. "In the barrio retaliation must come swift. You got to be down for yo' nation," they insist, their body language signifying they're out of it, though they make gestures with their fingers. "If someone fucks with your boy or your momma, you got to get 'im. We're Way-west 125th Street Bloodstone. This sign means crip-killers and executioners. You know what we're saying?"

"My momma is Misty (K)night," says Darkseed. "I know everything, and keep it a secret."

Clay, born a trick baby, easily forgets about them and concentrates on imagining himself doing a triple-master blaster; he sees himself sharing freaky love with a raunchy ho, sucking on a glass dick while the woman oprahs him, then blows. His homeys have told him all about it. Greedily eating an Almond Joy, Jorge and Nat (the tallest boys) crack up, slapping and touching Clay's bald head with their nut chocolate hands, leaving terrible stains on him. They continue to stroll with a cock-of-the-walk stride. All six take the subway away from Rumsey Playfield, traveling underground like black slaves, and come up on 125th Street, all ready, checking their backs for possible drive-bys as they cross the street. They discuss the latest murder at the Rucker, a guard nicknamed "I'll Be Back" found laid-out on the boulevard near Frederick Douglas.

"Future said dude had pre-fragmented bullets in his ass, multiple wounds, from somebody who wanted to make sure they'd stop him," Jorge says. The six-pack pass the canvas (y)awnings above open windows.

Every night

An old nut brown, dusty fat lady with sooty black hair watches them pass and whispers "Oh, Lady Be Good" in a musical tone. Quietly but full of Verve, she sings the best of the songbooks, the ballads. For Clay, she's like music to his ears.

"Hello, fat lady singing," Clay says 'cause he notices the irony.

“I know I’m no glamour girl,” the fat lady says, as if an orphan coming out of solitude, “but ladies like me sho’ hope to chase the blues away.”

The two oldest members of the group pick up the pace, stepping wildly as if part of a college fraternity. Playing a new game, the other three boys with Clay break off their route like split ends and dash for the sidewalk escaping the housing.

“You’re blasé,” the fat lady says to the boys; they play her off and attempt to move the crowd.

“Don’t run away—let go,” she says. She got an amputated leg and sits squarely on the stoop of an dilapidated brownstone in the Harlem projects, by a red light on the corner. She got her business out in the street and looks bedraggled.

“C’mon, man, forget her,” Jorge says, bored. “The heifer’s unsound. She’s doing the ‘Cow Cow Boogie.’”

“Ah, show me love,” Clay says, trying to strut bad at less than five feet tall. He’s got a foul mouth like the ballers down at Ruckers. He’s “The Best Kept Secret,” always looking for a way to further prove himself, only scarier. Clay’s crimeys think that he’s speaking to them (the way he did when they jumped him into the gang). But to Clay, the fat lady’s make-up mirrors his own mother’s, who for three years had encouraged him to sleep in her king-size waterbed while the gangbangers (Folks etc.) fought fiercely for blood money and territory outside. Lying in her underwear in the heat of the night, his mother would caress him gently with a box floor fan going to keep him cool, blowing him no-good. “It’s okay,” she would say, “it’s okay.” But even her eye shadow would be dark and running as if afraid, and his daddy was nowhere to be found.

Clay pretends to do “Back 2 Papa” and “Off The Heezay.” He is, after all, NBA street.

Unlike Clay’s mother, the fat lady on the stoop doesn’t attempt to move herself closer. She simply chuckles at him. She sings a ballad for the very tired and very sad lotus eaters.

Every night

Protesting the violation of human rights, the blues people of the horrible/whorable ghetto fuck and cuss like hardcore rappers making a low-budget video, mixing signals. The city bears/bares reminders of Attica in ’71: guards forcing prisoners to crawl naked on the yard; hostages horrifically taken and killed; arms twisted and faces put in feces; witnesses of various offenses force-fed through the nose while lying on a dead person’s bed; the common criminal suffocated by the frightening X-Man Black Dildo stuck in his or her mouth from crooked Caucasian cops supposed to be clean.

Girl, a starving welfare mother of the nineties hooked on serious drug culture, listens to the voice of Nelson Mandela on television (how Paul Robeson is his hero and a favourite of his is devouring freshly slaughtered sheep) and an old eight-track tape of Billie Holiday, and cooks her own blood in the small kitchen of a three-room apartment, number 6A. (Mandela, he likes plain porridge for breakfast, and fresh fruit and fresh milk.) She waits until the copper bottom of the stainless steel saucepan turns red, then sits down on the tile floor and reinjects the blood into her right arm for a high, afterwards

lifting herself up by any means necessary to see whether or not the gravy will make her any stronger.

“She uses mad drugs,” a female tenant wearing a clear plastic bag over a wet jheri curl tips off to her landlord downstairs. She sneezes, gesturing something about the foulness, saying Girl’s crib smells bad, of dead folks transported from the devastated cityscapes, as if a scene from *28 Days Later*. “The bitch is nefarious, definitely not safe,” Naomie Harris, the tough black woman, says. “Girl thinks she’s an alchemist or something, playing around with all those controlled substances.”

His jaws tight, landlord tells woman not to bother him again. “Do I look like Columbo to you?” he asks, smokes on his breath. Just before slamming his door, he adds: “This Girl ain’t shit compared to the rest of them.”

In 1928, it was her black great-grandmomma, a melancholy woman who crawled several miles to Memorial Hospital to rid herself of a severe toxemia, that created the madness; screaming but with no regrets, she pushed it out of her upset, nauseous stomach while down on her back on top of a rolling cart and, as a mean-spirited Garveyite, rebelliously gave it to Whitey before she herself passed. Two doctors dressed in white sheets promptly announced a birth defect and destroyed the premature baby, later justifying their actions by arguing that Downs Syndrome would have killed it anyway. What subsequently followed were race riots and 17 recorded lynchings, including several unpublicized ones done with strings of 1928 costume jewelry (many of the dark victims were hung with rings around their neck) that were rumored to have played telling music with the wind; just two of these recordings ended up being faded boogies.

A young white boy named John Cage went off and started hitting things in a four-minute-and-32-second protest, developing a chilling music of ethnic noise and percussion, when he saw the great-grandmomma’s body skirt past his waistline on a cart in the hospital alley/corridor; the old woman had remained hard with rigor mortis as the whites dumped her straight in a ditch after that evening’s sun was down and a death rain began to fall like a plague from almighty God, brewing an endless spell of stormy weather where blues begat blues.

Caressing an ivory bead necklace—postmodern voodoo strung down her skin and swinging recklessly beyond her high protruding collar bone, Girl hurriedly drops the needle on the right eye, scratching it into something forbidding. She staggers into the bedroom and opens a family diary saved under the plastic nightstand. She tries to ignore the footsteps and chatter and giggles outside her door, but she glances out of her open window and sees several boys strolling down below on the street trash-talking and imitating Globetrotters, the metal hoops dangling from her ears trying to withstand the swish of an unexpected high-arching shot of hot air that almost snatches her sheer dress.

Two daughters came from Girl’s great-grandmomma while she was a Harlemit and quite young, when she didn’t even have breasts: The first, Mama Black Widow, excited Paris all-male white crowds as La Negresse tap dancing, playing *Madame Butterfly* and performing “Moaning Blues.” Nothing compares to her these days, except maybe Donna Summer, who sung love to love you. Mama Black Widow died in 1948 at the age of 35 from syphilis that Sonny Liston, the fighter, carried around and passed to her on a one-night stand. Liston was a shifty, brooding motherfucker with huge, leathery fists. And, he also slept with the mob. So she wouldn’t touch him. Police found her resting by the

medicine cabinet in her row house, gripping a needle stuck into a chintzy common wall, small pieces of heroin and junk by her side and a poster of Dorothy Dandridge ripped to pieces next to some Heritage luggage. “Turns out, Mama Black Widow was nothing more than a skag,” country white folks said upon hearing the news. Niggers stressed that Ethel Waters was her hero, not the White Lady. A compassionate Spanish guest once heard her say to Sonny, “Take your black bottom outside.” And, Mama Black Widow’s own agent said her client insisted, “Please don’t talk about me when I’m gone.

“Who’ll get it when I’m gone?” she asked.

The second daughter was Mrs. Troy Hardaway. Girlfriend was married only by common law. She made a name for herself as a bad mulatto singer for Ed Small’s nightclub and a member of the notorious Harlem Blue Vein Circle for light-skinned coloreds. When Mrs. Hardaway began acting hincty and seddity at an early age and passing for white, her own momma threw her out into the street and told her that she was an unwanted pregnancy, the result of a rape by a rich Dutch master that paid her chump change to clean house.

With cocks and roosters crowing on the early morning of her 18th birthday, “Mrs. Hardaway, obviously somewhat disturbed, shot the 64 year-old senior citizen husband-daddy in front of their own two year-old daughter after he apparently had been molesting the child,” according to a stuttering overweight coroner, pursing his lips, sweat darkening his cotton shirt. In a private report to the police, the white man added that it was “too bad” he “wasn’t into necrophilia” because “she” was “certainly healthy” before “she shot herself in the mouth” in a successful effort to liberate herself. A girlfriend described the abusive husband as “a yellow man, a snake who had always hated the frog in her throat.” However, in the papers, the girlfriend later admitted that she was shocked when she entered Mrs. Hardaway’s rented flat and found her girl sitting sadly around some terra cotta with her lips open and dozens of flies married to the lining of her jaws; she said her “eyes looked hard but unglazed.” Curiously, Toussaint L’Overture, painted in tempera on brown wrapping paper by Jacob Lawrence, was staring down at her. Much later, but also for a knot, an unnamed close friend of the family got quoted as saying that “the man Mrs. Hardaway killed was her own daddy as she was determined to put an end to the cycle. Suicide was her idea of backtalk.”

“Unfortunately, blues walk,” she had told her landlord once, when things were better and she was feeling extremely high but paranoid about kin out to get her for revenge.

“Any moment can come back from the past, and from the dead, like a haint,” Girl whispers to herself.

Spooked, she waits until she hears the footsteps go away before moving again.

Girl gently lies back on a twin-size bed, stirred by the crossover dribble of the outdoor simulated leather basketball, the delusional kids dreaming of using their balls for the “Honey Dip” and “Backbreaker” moves. Their idols are Stretch and Spek, whose toss-ups (pieces) and tags on the walls were never the same.

Girl somehow manages to ignore them.

She takes notice of the brutal warning of dirty blues arresting a black suit by a stop sign, the glare of coppers firing up cigarettes, a Billy performing a fast, quick reading of the Miranda Rights. The diary’s shut, tight, no longer able to speak.

On a moony listless night with the tube right in front of her, Girl begins exploring herself. She feels deeply for her tilted/jilted uterus. She imagines her black skin as the braille of a stretched narrative, a horror story; she reads her body as text. She sees the bad blood in her body as an extended metaphor constructing a fever that makes her progressively weak and lethargic. She is the victim of African sleeping sickness, the thing perhaps taking the edge off, numbing the painful feelings like an epidural. To Girl, the seeds of labor—the burdens and abortions that came from being young, gifted, and black—pour out of the hot open pores of her skin. They appear angry, each seed very vocal like a curse word. With the frame supporting her depressed, she is laid back, attending to the her arms, then staring at the wild seeds as they fall to the bed and wait to grow. She thinks “Strange Fruit.” She is writer Octavia Butler accepting the Nebula Award. Things become cloudy for her.

As that familiar defensive voice in her subconscious slowly returns and again begins repeating “hush now, don’t explain,” the tube mumbles on. “Every night Winnie Mandela...”

Every night

By a (sex)six-shooter that has slept with her in her room like a man, Girl thinks “every goodbye ain’t gone” and prays for rebirth, the midnight-finish of the Saturday night special continually talking to her, the world passing by her window, the edges of her head and ashy black face lowered into the suffocating softness of her mattress, her Egyptian cotton sheets wiping the weeping, the bed acting as a conjuring table, her sandals neatly placed together by her side, her mouth doing incantations that are blanketed, rushes of air now blowing her gently and changing her chants into whispers like they were nothing, a few stray spooks on the street tipping in the wind to eavesdrop. Girl performs a hoodoo ritual, a kind of call-and-response uttered in tongues or tongue-in-cheek, while the homeless croon “Love Changes” outside, which she interprets as “Love Changes Outside.”

Always confused but trying to heal her wounds, Girl stares at the primitive nigger-flicker that, six years ago, she found in her ex-lover’s belly; like a ruthless pimp, the knife was kickin’ it until she dipped/interfered one sweet night. Now whenever Girl looks at the rough, broken tip of the rusty metal that she had pulled out of the man’s gut(s) while he squirmed in the grass, she cries a war where the man dies the night before. The Big Apple continually tempts her to perform the unforgivable sin, the roughest parts of the city muting her voice with its rotten core.

“No justice, no peace,” Girl says in cliché, but the language strikes a chord inside of her, perhaps something building into a romance. She carefully places the nigger-flicker under her latex pillow. Her tears flow like the East River running wildly toward West Hell, course like a waterfall whoring by throwing itself on the rocks. These blue specks of Cascade try to baptize her, wash the earth away.

Struggling to lean over the ledge by the window, Girl feels it, the letting go of her soul, the war water getting away from her, drowning the flowers on the Main Drag of Many Tears. Looking out of the window and down to the main stem, she smells Spike Lee’s joint and her skin scented with White Diamonds that a married man from the

village had bought her after sex. For Girl, Love is Mr. Do-Right, her own pusher, Prince as a symbol, the artist singing when doves cry. Looking down, she feels herself falling, seemingly the whole planet's Motherless Daughters by her side. But, at least Hope is there, too, 'cause Hope wrote the book on mothers dying too soon.

Girl thinks about the hole she dug for herself, the first piece of sugar that started her movement towards a deep six. During a party where couples swapped partners, a friend administered the drug to her like he was Dr. Jonas Salk himself giving his baby a mutant vaccine for polio, intended to settle her nerves.

The whole fucking thing turned out to be crazy. A cocksackie virus-thingy.

She sees the first mouth that demanded hers to stay silent, sees the 18-minute version of the French kiss during a raving mad escapade at a boss block party that had left her dancing and spinning.

Every night

Dancing and spinning and turning tricks are Girl's life. Through the distraction of pulse-pounding disco music like "Ring My Bell" pounding in her head, Girl listens to the blues talking back and shooting crap, screaming and shouting, as if toasting with a mike amplified through a loud speaker. "I put a spell on you!" black suit yells to cop. "Yeah, yeah, you and everybody else," cop replies, bending the criminal's black arm into a chicken wing in a place, a dark space, where Girl can't see it.

As the fat lady sings outside on a familiar stoop, Girl flings her unrelaxed hair farther out and continues to gaze downward, through the wet leaves of a shady elm, flakes of dandruff falling like snow from her head while she stares down the crowd. She is a dark-eyed, wavy haired lovely considering whether or not the crescent of the blue moon will catch her if she is unable to fly. Searching the space behind her big head, the police lights fade in and out of her seamy room, but the gun on the bed manages to stay eclipsed by her slim body. Defiantly widening her tiny shoulders so the crowd below can see her dangling, Girl feels the wind beneath her wings, the moist air smacking her O-shaped mouth, her two lips painted the color of love, her tulips painted the color of love. In her mind, Billie Holiday sings "Ain't Nobody's Business If I Do." In reality, Billie Holiday is long gone, and Holiday's idol Billie Dove, the great silent movie star, ain't performing any more either—"American Beauty" is officially dead. Girl is the folly now, routinely in bed with black pirates as if that work is part of her marriage clause. Now she suffers from a breakdown: She does *Night Watch*.

Taking a dim view of the city...

She leans even farther out there, pressuring her tired toes and blinking involuntarily, and listens to a small crowd of folks vibin', the sounds of bass/base traveling through the street on the way to nearby block parties where there are plenty of red lights. "Dere go dat hooker, that tramp, that little skeezer," one of the taller boys says, trying to conceal his ball and pump. Girl witnesses a short crippled dealer wheeling himself around and pushing candy to a bald-headed Michael or Montell Jordan look-alike breakdancing to fast jams on the corner, other people kicking it clean to the curb, the scraped pavement white with sugar and covered with broken rock, Funfetti, and veiny/vainy sidewalk talk. Everyone else in the street appears to be shaking and tore up by scarifications. "Later,

niggas,” says the cops or somebody; spacing out, Girl hears only the voices now. As the fat lady sings, Girl conceives another falling star goin’ home; it’s like all of her ideas for a wonderful life are beautiful babies born from her with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Every night

Her gangster girlfriends drive by in a black man’s wheels and fire mad-shit through the open window. “It’s all good,” they shout. Before they burn rubber, one of them climbs back into the backseat of the cherry ride and asks Girl what was wrong with “old school lovin’.”

Every night

Girl hangs out over the ledge, way past cool, and peeps the sound of the poor community airing dirty laundry, wooden clothespins snapping like brown people. With the breeze now blowing her gently, Girl blinks more slowly; the blackouts grow longer. She doesn’t know the story of Dennis Brutus; he is merely a metaphor of struggle and unrest to her until news correspondent Ted Koppel brings the story to her late. But what is not publicly known is that, after taping the interview, Koppel’s producer ordered the production crew to graphically alter the bright Brutus in order to “make him look like a gorilla,” like Marcus Garvey on his way to being deported. Talking out of the side of his neck and staring into the dusty screen at the raw sight of Girl, Koppel says that Brutus was shot in the back trying to escape black South African life under apartheid. It is February, Black Emphasis Month, so, indeed, *ABC News Nightline* shows Brutus looking as dark as a mug.

“When we come back,” says Koppel, sipping coffee he diluted with cream and sugar, “we’ll meet a Pan-Africanist who argues that blacks deserve special treatment.”

Koppel fades out, and suddenly the tube reverts to pitch black in a surreal moment before a public service announcement on high blood pressure, the importance of ensuring that hypertension doesn’t go unchecked.

“I got her fucking Bronco,” Girl’s landlord says aloud to himself in 1A. He’s sitting erect on a sofa and reading *The National Enquirer* that says Nicole Brown Simpson liked freebasing and threesomes. He puts the paper down, and one of his ashy hands crushes an empty Colt 45 Malt Liquor can in front a black-and-white television with foil ears and the volume quite loud. Outside his door, Jorge and Nat sneak further down the hallway to 1D and catch the nosey tenant by the leg before she can slam her door. The landlord hears somebody knocking on wood, but decides that it just ain’t worth it to get involved with someone’s else business. Picking up a J from a tray on his end table, he casually smokes and squeezes his penis, trying hard to remember when Girl’s rent is due, the bitter ashes dropping in his lap.

Meanwhile, Girl pulls herself out of the window and scrunches down on the bed and channel checks with remote control, working her program, working her nerves.

But the blackouts she cannot control.

Every faint sound seems to foreshadow a scene in a vaudeville blackout skit.

Every night

Somebody creates a disturbance downstairs. Usually, Girl spies a street fight that ends up in someone getting stabbed or shot with the victim crawling into her apartment building and crying for help, and the nosy tenant with the terrifying drip-curl would be hollering for the police and scaring them away at the same time. However, not this time: Girl hears only the tube, a lot of quiet low-key mumbo-jumbo.

Clay, Nat, and Jorge lean up against the wall in the hallway, breathing barbarically and perspiring.

“What you do in apartment 1D?” Clay asks, wilding, chewing Bubblicious and thinking that it wasn’t really right to leave him behind in order to go after a woman.

“Why you sweatin’ us?” Nat asks, putting a butter knife in the hip pocket of his Levi jeans like it was a holster. Then he blows on his fingers to cool them.

“My bad,” says Clay, holding his gun sideways as if it already had a body on it. Jorge rubs his hands on his striped pants, which were floodin’, and presses the tenant’s stinky, clear plastic bag against Clay’s mouth. “Shut up, nigga. This is how we do it.”

“Where are we supposed to be going to?” Nat asks Clay. “Let’s speed this thang up. Zeke and Rasheed can’t stay lookout forever, and that nigga you call ‘Quick’ has already jettied to the crib.”

“Follow me,” says Clay, tripping a bit as they head straight up.

Stepping behind Clay, Jorge unexpectedly stops on the stairs. Nat follows him. “This chocoladyke’s yours,” Jorge tells Clay. “Get to her. Go do her. She’s got yo’ daddy’s nigger-flicker, don’t forget. If you really want to be an OG, that is, the man straight from the set, you betta’ not bring yo’ black ass back without it.”

“Go ahead and book it,” says Clay. With bad intentions—thoughts of sticking his trigger-finger up Girl’s black ass, he climbs the rest of the stairs, then softly steps over to her door and lightly knocks on the wood, his eyes avoiding the peephole.

Every night

Girl’s bruised prayer-bones rest on the bed. The skeletons in her closet beg to get out. Her teeth chatter from a feverish chill as she picks up a skinny bomb and lights it, her big lips sucking and puffing, sucking and puffing, then waiting to exhale. A previously standing black Ashanti doll slumps into a corner of the room, its big head full of serious lines across the forehead. Out on the street, pimps and pushers smell her on dope and react as if a prostitute on drugs is free booty; they shout about getting some. “A customer,” Girl thinks. “A John.”

Every night

So she finally raises herself up, closes the window, and pulls down the shade, dope in one hand, a hush-hush in the other, a glass of day-old black cherry Kool-Aid sitting inside the straps of her sandal where her soul/sole was on ice the night before.

“Be there in a minute,” Girl says, loud enough for Clay to hear. Like a writer from the lost generation experimenting with being super high, Girl quickly places the joint on a saucer, sets the drink on the floor, and scribbles an earlier meditation into her diary: “One hand washes the other/there is always justice to satisfy/there is always one hand

justice washes to satisfy the other/justice washes to satisfy the other/doesn't have to be poetic or artistic like Janet Jackson or Maya Angelou/justice washes/sh--/amen."

Then, with sex seemingly her whole life's story, Girl strolls over to the door, undoes seven locks, and opens up, her dress lightly bouncing up and down like intercourse is something it is used to. "What you want?" Girl asks, checking out Clay, a little surprise(d).

Clay sticks his speaker in her face, forcing her to once again involuntarily blink in anticipation. "I think you know what I wants," Clay says, his nine-millimeter seemingly playing around as the bullets line up and wait to shoot her. The "s" is starting to come out of his mouth like water.

"Say, don't I know you, boy?" Girl asks. "Ain't you Misty (K)night's son, little bastard? Me and your momma were once real tight. We used to hang out together all the time."

"You don't know me," says Clay. "I'm your worst nightmare."

"You serious?" Girl asks, stepping back to the bed. "What if I was yo' momma?"

"Motherfucker, do her!" Jorge yells from the hallway. "Your name is my name!" From 12 or 13 feet away at the doorway, Jorge fires the red, white, and blue ball and strikes Girl in the face. Then, without hesitation, he dashes over and tackles Girl, pushing her through the window, the paper-thin glass pane.

For a single moment, Girl tries to hold on to the ledge, the wind repeatedly smacking her, her eyes turning red, her dress thrown into panic anxiety and now moving about in a useless frenzy, her every limb doped up...the blackouts she cannot control.

"Close your eyes, motherfucker[s]!" shouts Clay. He aims the gun at Jorge's spine and squeezes his shit.

With a great deal of fragmentation, Girl thinks "now I lay me down to sleep" and sees herself floating towards an intersection, intercourse her whole life's story.

There's no time to think. Clay murders Jorge, execution-style, a shot to the back of head. Then he races to the body to make sure Jorge is dead. He scurries out of the apartment, dragging Jorge with him, down the stairs and into a laundry room on the first floor, a trail of blood leading all the way up to the washing machine that asks him if he has four quarters.

Girl falls wickedly, hitting all of tree branches on the way down until they beat the ugly out of her. The limbs twist mama all the way around, causing her to land on her neck in the street. Her ivory beads break loose from her necklace and get kicked to the curb; they roll 'round like all of her marbles or postmodern voodoo on the surface.

"This is *Nightmare on Elm Street* for women of color," says black female witness doing her own makeup in preparation for the reporters. "The kind of revolutionary stalker/slasher drama that we gotta go through on a daily basis, you know, 'tryin' to run away from someone but finding that the ground has turned to porridge and you can't escape" [see fast-rewind].

"I am the victim—tell them who I am," Girl imagines herself saying before a final blackout.

Amy—the stereotypical little blond, binge-eating, white-waif, former-cheerleader-from-Paula Addul's-camp, onlooker—has the nerve to drop her vanilla shake and ask Girl if she's alright.

“Yeah, bitch, I’m fine,” Girl mumbles, though she wasn’t even right.

The sight of Girl makes Amy want to vomit, so she runs away.

“Using a gentle cycle, I can rinse away yo’ blood if you hype me wit four quarters,” the machine says, squatting beside bloody Clay like a toad, murmuring a stew of slang and the Nommo of evil seduction. Begging the washer to be quiet, Clay conservatively stays hunkered down in a corner by the trash and closes his eyes.

Girl’s face is turned down until it slaps the street, blood easing its way out of the busted vessels and hiding on the concrete underneath the body, the see-through dress now still but revealing her extremely flat breasts, a bird chest baring no more than lumps to a curious crowd. With God as her witness, the fat lady echoes the ballad for the very sad and very tired lotus eaters as several hoochie mommas rip the rest of the jewelry off her body and fly in the direction of some weed.

“What’s all that shit up in the trees?” the blues ask.

“Oh, that?” an eyewitness answers. “That’s just the crimson-red foliage from the Summer Wine Ninebark. Fall blows those stunning, smoky leaves for a dramatic effect.”

“Negro, I know what effing leaves are,” the cop says. “What’s that other shit up in the trees?”

“Oh, that’s where the shady elm on this street whipped the ugly off the Girl like Freddy Krueger invading the dreams of a *Bondwoman’s Narrative*. You see those purple flakes of dead skin, that torn flesh, snagged by the forks? Well, the elm sank its teeth into the ‘little tenderoni,’ ate her clean/alive, splattered Harlemites with tomato sauce.

“As long as you don’t nab me [he tells a story of being like Redd Foxx, owning an Uzi and a watch from Elvis and once eating Ivory soap to avoid the draft], I don’t give a fuck. This ole field nigger is perhaps a dopefiend to you, maybe you think I’ve had too much hep, but, like a major playa in the film *Return of the Mack*, I would’ve licked this Girl’s coochie, too.

“As is, Fall make it clear there’s hell up in Harlem.”

“Goddamn!” the cops says, looking away from the witness. “For the love of Imabelle!”

Photographers snap, taking shots as if Girl’s just another strung-out supermodel. “Hey, nigger, can you come over and block this light?” one of the cops asks the witness, in an effort to maintain control.

“H to the naw!” the old man replies. He almost has a heart attack. He’s changes to Stevie Wonder in “Superstition,” staring coldly back at the blues ‘cause he doesn’t know why they’d even ask him to do some funky mess like that.

“I prefer not to,” he says, as if there’s a choice.

Every night, the negro almost crouches in fear of being busted, of being put face down to the ground by some blues singing country music.

Like one of the Five Blind Boys from Alabama turning his soul over to God, Clay discovers he’s stained. He rubs one hand over the other before detecting the footsteps of someone coming closer. “I should have never left a trail of blood for Nat to follow,” Clay thinks, envisioning millions of gnats all around. He violently shakes on his knees, his moving Converse sneakers squeaking on the yellow squares of the floor. The

glorious Whirlpool machine whips up a storm, spits down on his big head before dumping a load of something or other onto his dark sole/soul. The machine gleefully hands him washing detergent/deterrent.

Inside, where the dirty laundry plays, the stainless steel tub shouts, “and the Oscar goes to...Clay (yummy) Sandifer for his ultimately riveting performance as John Wayne, showcased in *True Grit!* You’ll find the final act particularly stirring.” The waters are troubled, overturning, and the Tide’s churning, working to clean up all the mess that *niggaz* have left. It’s true that in the ghetto/barrio people are always like that: hot/cold, spinning around to no end, agitated—this turbulent cycle destined/determined to repeat itself merely for the amusement of the whitest whites, that is, the honkies happy (euphoric, elated) when the fuses ignite and the niggers blow up every night.

“Yeah,” they shout, chanting as a mantra. “It’s about to go down! I said, it’s/about/to go/down!”

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