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Singing at Clocks

They found the old boy breathing water. Facedown in the flood's leftover puddles after the storm, his truck gone and swept away, his crusty nose was plugged with gravel, with grit, no bubbles blowing or nothing. Didn't even have to take his pulse; Daddy had tapped foot with foot and nudged Jason's stiffdead bulk and that was that. Candy's brother was gone. And around them, the town was a lanced blister: destroyed and ugly, the skin of the ground all gouged and weeping. Jason wasn't the only body they'd found; he was just the one they'd found first. All around them were nothing but bodies. Candy eyed them curiously. They were all swollen up with themselves, blown up like grocery store balloons. *That's a party!* But it wasn't any party. Candy kept looking at Jason's face, expecting the dead man's smile to crack open, his lips to split into that easy grin, but he lay there, understandably silent. There wasn't any party, and Jason was dead now, and Candy scratched at her scalp until the dandruff loved her shirt white.

Daddy had told Candy it wasn't any business of his whether she looked Jason's way or not, who the fuck was he to tell her to do anything anyhow, and couldn't she see the men were busy with their dying work and just *leave,* just *leave, Candace.*

But Candy hadn't left. Instead, she'd let her sneaks squirm in the mud and watched as Daddy snapped feral at Old Joe over Jason's body. Jason had been handsome (there was the past tense, already creeping into her mouth.) He *had* looks. He *had* lived. Candy tongued the words like a sweet, tucked them into her cheek. And the thought of Jason, his being dead and all, it lit in her brain like a good idea, an electric surge. She thought of the thought in different shades of color: Jason's dead in pink, Jason's dead in blue, Jason's dressed up for death in neon green. Before long, they had dragged his body up and away, the men from town hauling his limbs back to their dark old house, and Candy was left dreaming her Candy dreams: in all of them, Jason was dead, in vivid technicolor.

Hell had an eye fixed at every window the day the hurricane came. For a week, there'd been whispers: folks new to town making sudden noises about going to visit family in Bastrop, animals making their slinking pilgrimages to somewhere on higher ground. Candy had watched them all parade through the wide expanse of their derelict lawn with boredom or get in their too shiny cars and drive off into the wind. She didn't mind the silence, or the hushing of the trees. The town had seen worse. Storms came and people died, but Candy wasn't ever going to be one of them. She heard they named the storm Natalie and nodded approvingly, cause she thought the name was pretty. Candy, contented, had watched the sun get shy from shining and as the day got gray and moody, she hummed a little tune to herself as she went about her business, selected her books for waiting out the storm. Rain started its sprinkling, God flinging out water with His slippery fingers, and Jason wasn't home.

Daddy had been pissed, talking about how Jason was dumber than a bag of rocks and what was he thinking, driving out to Houma in this weather, and he wasn't going to waste no time worrying over the idiot if Jason wasn't going to worry about himself. The hours tick ticked on and on and Jason still hadn't come home. When the rain began its dance with the thunder, playing that age old danger song, Daddy had said through his grinding teeth that they couldn't waste no more time on the dead, and had sent Candy around to latch all the windows. Every towel and rag were stuffed into cracks and crevices, and the water jugs collected. Daddy heated up two cans of soup while they still had electricity, and they ate in silence as the wind moaned around them like one of Daddy's girls, the ones with the battleship hips and the bad attitudes. Candy might've been seventeen, but she knew that was plenty young without trying to be any younger, and all these women did trying to be young as they felt was look older than old. They were, all of them, Methuselahs in frosted lipsticks. They ate their soup as the outside moans got louder.

"Where all you think your brother went?" Daddy had grumbled at her like some god.

"Don't know. Maybe visiting that girl?" Candy had sniffed, hacking at a hunk of chicken that fat still clung to, tried to split it in half in the world of her soup bowl.

"He's too good for that girl."

"Jason's not too good for no one."

"Forget Jason, you need a man. Why don't you go out with no one?"

"Because men are stupid and Jason would kill 'em before I could do anything fun."

"Better you have someone like your brother taking care of you before someone not so nice comes along. Lord knows I'm no dog in that fight."

"Why is he too good for that girl?" she had asked again, curiosity slashing her across the chest. He looked at her over their soup, over the long-tapered candles they'd lit for a long moment. Outside, the wind unloosed its jaw, went screaming out.

"You and your brother are good stock. And he can't be chasing some tail out in Houma, he needs to be home, not fooling around with these girls, these girls can't even finish high school without getting into some nonsense. No. You and your brother, you're smart. You can't be with stupid people."

"You ever meet her?"

"Don't need to. Jason might be smart, but he's still led like every man on earth has been led and will be led until they croak," Daddy had said, making a big show of cupping his crotch and squeezing it until Candy had to look away. Daddy *huh*ed and chuckled, shaking his head. "You're too easy to scare, Candy. That's what's wrong with you."

The men had made what living room there was into a funeral parlor; Jason's body was flung up on the couch with their Mama's crocheted white blankets on top of him. *Great,* Candy thought. Now they'd never get the death smell out of them and he'd have to take them into the Great Beyond with him. Carl Dedeaux and Old Joe had Daddy by the shoulders, and made sure Daddy was slung low and careful into his armchair. Daddy's hand made a claw covering his face like a fleshy veil. Shoulders heaving and shit. Candy moved back onto the porch, put her hands on her hips and swiveled her gaze from the left side of the yard to the right, noting every branch and tree and power line that came down. Natalie, for all her charming name, had turned out to be quite the old bitch.

Candy nodded once to herself, then twice, all rational, then went back inside to make a list of Shit to Do. The clock in the living room chimed three. She couldn't help but pass Daddy on her way up the stairs to her

bedroom, Daddy who was still turned inside out in his wailing, no matter how many men were pressing bourbon onto him, sloshing it out of cups and dribbling it into the open wound of his mouth. *My boy,* he kept saying, *my boy is gone.*

Old Joe stopped his consoling Daddy to glance her way.

"Candy, baby, don't look." *But how will I know for sure he's dead?*

Someone had thought of throwing the blanket over Jason's face, maybe Old Joe.

Candy felt sorry for the blankets.

Jason had started coming to her in the nighttime, that stilldark where the world moved slow and sure around Candy in her bed like water. She'd fan her long hair out on the satin pillowcase she'd dug up in an old closet and pretend she was a mermaid. She'd suckered Daddy into paying for some blue lights that looked as though you'd lit up the sea from underneath and strung them all up and down her walls. She lived there, under the sea, a creature from the deep. Prehistoric, Candy was. Some beast you'd find in a crevice, minding its own business and not hurting anybody. He'd peer into her room, creep behind the door. That first time, all those years ago, the light behind him had made a halo out of his blond hair. She thought he was some avenging angel or something.

Candy, you asleep?

No.

Try and sleep. You want some water or something?

I'll take some water, yeah.

And he'd come back with the water in a tall wine glass, its belly all round and full, and she couldn't see him swirling it with some shit in the dark, but he must've. Because the next time she woke, he was next to her, and on her, and she couldn't say anything at all, not even to sing.

Layla, Carl's wife, took their dirty laundry away to be cleaned.

"There isn't anything worse than grieving and having nothing clean to put on. You give that here."

There were other folks from the town who'd maybe died. Carl Dedeaux had lost a cousin in the storm who lived farther out on the water. Mrs. Jackson in town was worried about her daughter, who had been making

her way home from Baton Rouge. Surrounded by all this dying and maybe-death, Candy set out the next morning when Daddy had finally calmed to sleep with his brown liquor and took stock of her surroundings. Her legs were bruised and scarred from where she'd pick at shaving cuts until they made tiny craters in her skin from where the seams hadn't fused quite right, but she knew she cut a figure in her shorts and sneaks and there was dying, but there was also living. And she had no intention of giving the latter up for the former. Death was dull as a butterknife. In that world, that world of living for oneself, she was a straight razor.

She and Daddy had been lucky, when you thought about it. Closer to the coastline of town, where the water made its slow but steady encroachment year after year and the bald cypress trees stuck out of the marsh like broken fingers, houses were knocked down and soaking underwater. The Vincent family, with all their earthly belongings, were posted up at the store, sitting on the curb like they knew what to do with themselves. The little girl, Margot, was crying.

At the bar, she found Carl, and Dennis, and Louis, and they bought her a Manhattan because she was a fancy girl they said and needed something hard and sweet to get her through. She noticed how Louis' hand flirted with the ratty tatty edge of her shorts and didn't say nothing because who would she show the song and dance to? Jason was dead, and Daddy might as well have been. She lived among dead men now. She watched Louis' hand settle warm and soft on her thigh and said nothing, just sucked the juice from the maraschino cherry off her fingers. Watched Carl and Dennis speak in low tones about funeral arrangements and *Jesus Christ* and *hasn't enough of the land gone underwater?* These mechanical men and their mechanical lives, who might as well have been dead too. And then there was Candy's Mama long before her, hair blowing out like a streamer when they'd lost her to a car salesman from Shreveport, who had come down to visit family and was enchanted by this woman with the long blonde hair that a man could lose his hands in. He lost his hands in her hair, and Candy had lost her. Now, Candy had lost just about everyone.

She took to looking at the clock when Jason would come to her, when he would do what he would do with her body, palm at her breasts and thighs, scoot between her legs like he'd always been there, and she looked at the

clock and counted the seconds. It was a game, you know, after a time. How long would it take, and would it be any shorter than the last time. Maybe there was a science to it all. The sooner it was done with, the sooner it might never happen again. And the clock ticked on. She asked Daddy about getting a lock for her bedroom. Daddy had said no, what was she, stupid, and if she was scared of something now, he'd make sure she had a reason to fear something later.

Layla brought over the laundry, a casserole, and had said nothing, just patted Candy on her shoulder and tripped down the steps, her dress on her like shutters hanging off a house, her sensible orthopedic shoes sliding over cracks in the walk. Candy liked Layla. Layla, and her ill-fitting dress and orthopedic shoes.

Candy went upstairs with the basket balanced on her hip, where she imagined she'd put a baby if she ever had one, and found her father dead asleep in her bed. A spilled handle of vodka was on the ground next to him, and Candy sat the basket down carefully before shaking him awake.

"Daddy. Daddy, you're in the wrong place again."

"Leave me be, Candy."

"Daddy, it's my bed. You gotta get out of it."

"Your bed? I'm not in your bed," but even as the words left his mouth, his eyes went blurring across the room and he shook himself, just awake to the point of doing. After a second, he swung his feet over the side and fumbled his way to the door. From the frame, he took a long look at Candy. They stared at each other, each trying hard to figure out this sudden silence. Daddy spoke.

"I know you'll miss him, baby. But I don't think you'll miss him much."

Candy turned away from him as he left her room and emptied the basket of clean clothes onto her bed. The fabric fell slow over the sheets, flutters of cotton socks and the stringy flab of her satin thongs, the harsh screed of denim in her hands. She watched her hands fold these clothes, press them into quarters, smooth out the wrinkles in her shirts, her crop tops that let her stomach show, hang like she was pregnant over the band of her jeans.

She'd forgotten his boxers must've been there, crushed at the bottom of the basket like so much goodwill. When she fished the pair out from

the basket and flapped them open, there they were, stained and grody as anything, elastic waistband fraying from where his ego had stopped him from buying a bigger size. She looked at them for a long time. Just looked at them. It felt strangely intimate, the looking. As though she was seeing something she ought not to have seen. She'd never thought about what he actually did when he came to her, only that it made her want to curl up under the bed and make friends with the dust bunnies. Her hands folded the boxers, then shook them out and folded them again. And shook them out, and folded them again. This, until the clock chimed and kept its chiming song until dark, and the fireflies came out and Candy didn't remember what she'd been folding in the first place and why it mattered anyhow.