

The last time I spoke to Sweet Loving be the last anybody seed hide or hair of her ‘round these parts. I goes; “Mama, why don’t I gots your last name?” I be a rubbing on her shoulders an’ smoothing stray hairs clump together on the back of her neck.

“I done been hung with a bogus identity. My name, Black Heart, scares off the sisters. Black Loving rolls off a tongue smooth as sweet cream flowing thru the paddles of a butter churn—it be a better choice.”

“How many times are we gonna have this here conversation? I told you not to call me your mama. I done escorted you into this world. Now, you gots to take your own direction! Lordy, sometimes you act as messed up as the devil hisself! I got nothing to do with your name an’ you ain’t got nothin’ to offer them ebony lovelies that you keeps raging on about. Your daddy, Mr. Boston Heart, done named you. He come a skulking ‘round after I screamed like hell to Jesus and dropped your sorry ass, all slipping and a sliding, ‘cross them pearly tiles on the white women’s powder room floor over to Gramacy’s Department Store. There you be, showing off for the entire world, a spout of tar sprouting from a field of women’s cotton foundations and whatnot. Mister Boston picks you up, he does, swats your behind, looks into your eyes and says; ‘This one’s a Black Heart.’ He never ponied up money enough for me to carry you and I never signed on to be a fulltime mama. He up and leaves you with me. That sum-bitch prob’ly fathered twenty of you all’s half-brothers an’ sisters an’ he ain’t took care of one of his begettin’s yet.”

Sweet is dabbing a special potion called *Jasmine Seduces Gardenia* about her ear lobes. She swears when god-fearing ladies get themselves a sniff, their faces turns red with the prickly heat and they be prone to swoon while their men go all moony-eyed an’ can’t keep from thinking wiff their other head.

“Now leaves me be—I gots to be gittin’ to my Billie Holiday and *Old Tomcat Gin*. Don’t be sporting your ugly mug round here no more either. You done scared off the Reverend Pike when he come a courting. I swear to Christ, you done run off all the eligible brothers and half the married men in Macomb County. Damn! Now I’m a needing a shot of something way more potent than booze, just talking at you wears me down . . . Your sorry ass better be moved outta here by the time I gits back—you bes’ be striking out on your own”

Like I says, that be the last anyone inhabiting these parts ever seed of Sweet Loving. I stay in Mama's house for a time a wondering when she be back. Funny thing though, the morning after Mama didn't make it home the whole dang floor turn up caked with swamp muck. I think to myself that a feral sow must be on the prowl.

Mama's food run out about the same time Mister Boston Heart hissself shows up on the front stoop. When I gits 'round to opening the door he pushes past.

"Good lordy! What a pigsty. Boy, where's your mama?"

"Out—she don't want no truck wiff you, you four flusher."

He be standing there in patent leather shoes, spats, striped dress pants, white shirt wiff rolled up sleeves, suspenders, but no coat. That goddamned hat, folks call it a bowler, perched on his head hiding the baldness of it all. The ol' bastard always seems to be sum kinda short when it come to parading around in full dress. Mister Boston, he pull out this gold turnip-shape pocket watch and catches the hour. Someday I aim to have me a timepiece jus' like that one. Then, he advances on me like he be a marching on Selma; jaws a flapping, waving his walking stick like some kind of circus lion tamer.

"I knowed you wasn't the second comin' the first time I cast an eyeball on you. None of my progeny has passed the test so far. My seed is more than up to it. I need your mama to bore me another child. One that be angelic and don' give me no sass."

That be the last anyone 'round these parts ever heard or knowed of Mister Boston Heart.

Cassie Mae say I can stay wiff her if I take her to the Harvest Celebration wiff me and I don't stick that serpent swinging between my thighs into any of those pretty white girls who always spy on my comings and goings. Cassie won't let me stick my big dick in her, either, but she plays wiff it some. She keeps a tellin' me if's I treat her righteous and be understanding of her Mama's ways, one day she'll take me out back of the hen house an' let me ride her like thunder rollin' off the Smokies. For the time bein' I don't mind her a clutching onto me every now and again, but I do got my own needs begging for daily relief. I moved to the hayloft in Cassie's mama's barn. Her ma be a big woman and always having a hard time a gitting through doorways and such.

She hain't been up in the loft for a dozen years—the ladder plumb won't support her. For me, a slopping hogs an' scratching 'round the garden wiff a hoe, she leaves food out on the back stoop. I has to be there when she goes to a ladling it out or Bullet, her leopard-looking cur, will eat my swill along wiff his in one gulp. The first time I stay out to Cassie's, her mama reaches through the side vent in my bib overalls and grabs me 'round the privates and squeezes until I done every chicken dance I can think of.

“You ever use this thing on my little girl; I'll chop it off with the kindling hatchet.”

“Yes'm.” I screech as she ratchets up the pressure.

“If you be a thinking that you man enough to use your equipment, bring it up to my bed.”

She give one last twist and then loosened her grip. I hurt so bad I can't make water for days. My balls swell up an' look like two grapefruits stuffed into too small a sack. I shag my ass down to Goodfellow, the village healer. He takes me into his back room for an examination.

“Boy,” he says, “on a scale of one to ten, how bad is your pain?”

“I give it a ten,” I groan.

“Okay, then. Drop your drawers and lay your business on this bench. Move your hand and close your eyes, it'll be over before you know it.” Smack!

He must have hit me wiff the flat side of a spade, 'cuz it be the only implement I seed in the room. The fresh burst of pain throws me to the floor. Goodfellow stands there a smiling down at me and says; “I bet you don't feel no pain in your balls at all.” Then he steps through the doorway an' leaves me sprawled on his back room floor writhing around like I be some kind of snake run over by a steel rimmed wagon wheel . . . That proved to be the last time anyone 'round these parts seed that old prick Goodfellow.

Somehow, I gets myself back up the haymow. When I finally stand upright long enough to put in a full day of work, I notice a dried-up batch of swamp muck leading up the ladder right to the hay bales I laid up on. That goddamn sow must be a tracking me.

The last day of the Harvest Celebration is upon us, church bells git to ringing at midnight—signaling the end of the festivities. Then, we all show up for Sunday service and those of us who ain't been dunked gets taken down to the slough and dragged into Johnson's Crick. We gits some words said above our heads then held under water until the last bubble escapes our lips. The bodies then be hauled up on bank, face down. Them's that don't git up on their own are said to be hiding a black heart and gets buried in Potter's Row just outside the cemetery's gates. Now, I never let them catch me up for a dunking 'cause of fear that I own on account of my name already being Black Heart. I am willing to keep on a breathin', rather than finding out if the devil is holed up in my own skinny self.

We wuz on our way to Sunday meeting, Cassie an' me be a walking behind her Mama on account of her blocking all that wind and rain pouring down off'n the Smokies. Somebody toll' me that the sun ain't shined in a fortnight, that be the reason that I show up for the service—I be sick of the wetness an' the seating here be dry as the cunt of a barren heifer.

Cassie and her Mama stand dead center in the choir and their voices soar with angels. They hits them notes that brung sunshine to a sea of cloudy faces. Why, they both cleared a span that lent buoyancy to sinking hearts and more important, showed direction to this here displaced urchin. I ain't in need of hearing the preacher's words threatening hellfire and damnation; a jealous lover or a runaway team could end my days on this earth at any moment. I figures that I be confronting the demons of the nether world soon enough. I just be begging for the fleetest moment of peace. Please, let me suck the teat of life long enough to grows old, maybe even allow me time to imparts my wisdom upon the down trodden. Lord knows; I stumble along the same crooked path.

As we trail in her mama's wake, Cassie be explaining that this afternoon she feel like laying out back of the hen house for her go at thunder rollin' off the mountain and I finally gets to be the thunder. But first she says, I gotta go up to her mama's room and 'splain to her how it all gonna be, man-like. She says her and her ma talk it all out last night and the path is clear for me to make my play. Right about now I starts welling up like some kind of fence post until the idea of making my way to her mama's bedroom wilts me faster than new sprung clover showered in dog piss. I'm a pondering all this latest information when I believes I catches the scent of Jasmine and Gardenias which done jerks me around 'til I be sporting a corner post made of the stoutest oak.

I be having a hard time catching air and truth be told, I be feeling more than a little faint thinking 'bout my own mama when all a sudden a dirge of church deacons gathers me up an' pitches me face first into Johnson's Crick. The world begins filling wiff darkness. I fight like the dickens but there be too many old men and they done got the jump on me. I feel the turnip-shaped watch slide from my pocket but I can't grab fo' it being they have my arms held tight to my sides. I git me a creepy revelation and the notion strikes me that a slew of missing bodies is turning over in swamp muck applauding the goings on.

It feels like the whole church crew be sitting on my backside when all a sudden I about gets turned inside out by the devil struggling to escape my sorry self. I knows, just knows if's I open my mouf to renounce his evilness I be drowned fo' sure. The blackness grows and there be no tunnel to crawl through and damn sure, no light to guide a body at the end of it.

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