

Familiar Sounds

Velvet had found her mother collapsed on the kitchen floor the night before, but woke with the sensation that everything was the same as it ever was. The trudging sounds of a Saturday morning in Harlem played on. The city bus emitted its grey exhaust as it crept down her block; Mr. Medina, the neighbor with whom she shared a bedroom wall, hacked and wheezed and twisted as he struggled to sit up in bed. His mattress springs cried underneath his weight.

Velvet was used to the dull quiet in her own apartment. Her mother was usually gone at this hour— at her new job, Leo's Florals & Events. She couldn't get off Saturdays to go to church with Velvet. Weddings and funerals peaked during the summer, and Leo could not spare any of his employees on the busiest day of the week of the busiest part of the year.

Velvet mimicked her mother's nagging voice as she stood in front of the mirror. *Fix your part. You need more mousse than that. Get that grit out your eye!* She followed the orders to a tee. The phone rang as Velvet twisted her scrunchie in as many revolutions as it could take, and rang again just as she grabbed her pocketbook and headed for the door.

"Hello?" A scruffy Italian voice filled the living room as the answering machine hummed. "I'm calling to reach Val...Stewart? Val? I hope this is indeed your number." Leo said, dragging out each word.

Velvet wondered how much Leo knew about their life as she put on her shoes and locked the door behind her.

The Hopkins were already parked in front of her gray slab of a building, on time—a quarter to eight, as expected. Velvet's mother had arranged for them to escort Velvet to church since she couldn't, and The Hopkins had, without incident, for the past few Sabbaths.

They exchanged soft ‘good mornings.’ Mrs. Hopkins yawned in the passenger seat and picked sleep out of her eyes. Her relaxed hair was slick and shiny, not a hair out of place, and made the car smell like lavender and olive oil. Mr. Hopkins stretched out the aches in his back and shoulders; he twisted in the driver’s seat and moaned before he started the car. They drove down the avenue, in the shadow of elm trees. Sometimes they drove to the radio was tuned low on the gospel station. But the only soundtrack that morning was of the wind rushing through Mr. Hopkins’s open window. Velvet shivered but rather than say anything she counted the streets and guessed when Mr. Hopkins would turn. Mrs. Hopkins held her hair down to her face. “Greg,” she bemoaned. He quickly rolled up his window.

They arrived at the grim church before the sun had and separated in their Bible Study groups. The adults sat on one end of the windowless room in a circle of folding chairs, and the youth in their own circle on the other side. Velvet crossed her ashy ankles as the older girls with rolled up skirts sat across from her. Sister Lorna, the elderly widow of the last pastor, braced herself into the metal folding chair with a book in her arms. “I’m going to read one of my favorite stories to you” she said, clearing her throat.

Velvet quickly realized it was the story of Ruth and Naomi, one of her mother’s favorites. But she couldn’t, for the life of her, remember the tale. She sat up straight and held on to everyone of Sister Lorna’s words. The old woman held open a page of Naomi and her daughters-in-law kneeling in the desert, close to death—wrinkles that looked more like scratches as Sister Lorna’s thin fingers clawed at the edges of the book.

“Naomi decided to return to Bethlehem, her homeland, and free her daughters-in-law of the burden of caring for her. But Ruth refused to abandon Naomi,” Sister Lorna continued. “They said farewell to Orpah and travelled to Bethlehem.”

“I would have been like Oprah,” one boy named Elijah cracked. The older girls giggled but were quick to cover their mouths when Sister Lorna looked up from her glasses.

She held up another illustration, this one of Naomi slumped on a cot. Velvet turned her head. She couldn't stomach at any dead bodies, not even if just colorful illustrations.

“Velvet, pick up where we left off” Sister Lorna called out, grimacing.

“Can she even read?” Elijah asked. The older girls cackled. And the lump in Velvet's stomach rose to her throat. She frowned at the book, at Sister Lorna's knobby knuckles, at the seemingly dead woman on the cot.

She found the next sentence just below Ruth's dirty bare feet and read. “Ruth nursed Naomi back to health.”

Pastor Raymond placed a hand on Sister Lorna's shoulder and walked away. His maroon robes swept up dust on the floor. The old woman sped through the last few pages.

“I want you to think about how much your parents take care of you,” Sister Lorna said, shutting the book. She locked eyes with every child. “You may not begin to comprehend until you have your own children. You'll need them for the rest of your lives. And you must take care of them one thousand times more,” she said landing on Velvet. “It's no easy task. Now stand.”

Velvet thought about one thousand things as she stood and bowed her head. How she was now in the category of children who ended up in homes. And although she didn't know exactly what those homes were, she knew they were only ever said with disgust. When they finished group prayer, all the men and older teen boys rearranged the folding chairs so that they all faced the podium. Velvet sat next to the Mrs. Hopkins and dropped her pocketbook on the floor. Mrs. Hopkins bent down and a whiff of lavender filled Velvet's nostrils, although much faded from

when they were in the car. Mrs. Hopkins retrieved the pocketbook and placed it in Velvet's lap. "Ladies don't leave their purse on the ground," she whispered.

Pastor Raymond barely managed to shout over the industrial fan as he welcomed the church. The old men slumped in their seats. The old women fanned themselves with pamphlets. "Let us start with prayer," he shouted, timidly. The congregation stood up, gradually, and shut their eyes and bowed their heads. "Father, who art in Heaven..." His voice yielded to the fan and Velvet lost focus. In the pinks of her eyelids, she saw herself sitting on a dusty cot in grimy cell, her lips cracked, her skin wrinkled and grey. Her heart raced so fast her hands twitched in Mrs. Hopkins's palm. She opened her eyes and stared down at her shoes.

*

Church let out during the hottest part of the day. All the mousse in Velvet's hair had melted along her hairline in milky pools. Her stomach growled in her throat. She slumped against the iron gate surrounding the church. Mrs. Hopkins stood beside her, doling out curbside goodbyes that turned to gossip when Mrs. Taylor walked over. Velvet felt a neediness rise in her the way she burrow into her mother's thigh to get attention. She fidgeted in place until her fidgets became steps. She drifted down the block, staying within the parameters of the church.

The New Zion Church was just a run-down community center in the middle of the projects. Most of its windows were boarded up by plywood and security bars to prevent squatters. Velvet froze at a tag sprawled against one side of brick building. "SHAWNA SUCKS DICK", it read. Pastor Raymond, who was making his rounds on the curb, grabbed Velvet by the shoulders. "Don't mind the filth terrorizing our building," he announced to everyone in the vicinity. His fingers dug into Velvet, making her straighten her spine. "I put in a request with the

Housing Authority for a power wash and new windows. Soon we'll have the sanctuary we deserve!" He tossed Velvet to his side and walked off; his robes billowed behind him.

All the soap in the world couldn't get rid of this soot, Velvet thought. She used to ask her mother why they couldn't go to the "fun" church—the one that met on Sundays had a real choir and band, who celebrated Christmas and Easter and birthdays, who ate meat, and sometimes candy. They sang so proudly, through thick walls that poured onto the street, and charmed the whole block. Their dismissals looked like a parade. Velvet always peaked inside, while they held the doors open and kissed each other on the cheek—all the bright lights and high ceilings, polished pews with velvet cushions, and angels painted on every wall. They had something to be happy about, it seemed to her. But her mother had only offered that New Zion had happened to find her at the right place and time, and how she was lucky to have a community—most people spent their whole lives never finding any.

Velvet trudged through the congregation. Fabric stuck to skin. Pressed curls fell and frizzed. They slumped drowsily like cattle, and reeked. Double parked cars lined the streets, and buses and taxis swerved and honked around them. Velvet kept an eye out for Mr. Hopkins's car as she pressed through the crowd.

She came across Elijah and another teen named Roger perched under a dying London tree. The bark peeled in oblong squiggles and revealed a layer of grey, sticky skin. It almost looked like camouflage. Velvet stood on the other side of the tree and fidgeted until the thin canopy casted some shade on her face.

Elijah elbowed his buddy in the gut, then grinned as if they were in on the same joke. "You lost?" he asked.

Velvet ignored them. She dug her nails into the bark and ripped off sizeable piece of bark that smelled like sap. The boys whispered under their breaths and giggled. “Yo, Velvet, where your mom’s at?” Elijah asked. He cackled and Roger grinned like a jester.

“Don’t worry about it,” Velvet said.

Elijah raised a fist to his open mouth and made slurping noises. Roger clutched his gut and rolled over. “Why she got you out here in a granny dress?” Elijah smirked an older girl who walked by with her mother, but she kept her head forward, her Bible clutched across her breast. “You should come in looking cute for me,” Elijah said turning his attention back to Velvet. She kicked hard at the root and got dirt in her shoe. “You much prettier than them other girls.” Roger sucked his teeth and made like he was going to storm off. “I’m serious,” Elijah continued. He stood in front of Velvet now and whispered. “You could be my girl, ya hear?”

“Leave her alone,” Roger said, chuckling softly, trying to maintain a joke. Velvet hid behind the tree, but Elijah followed her.

“Let’s go get some water,” he said. He cocked his head to the building and curled his fingers around Velvet’s wrist. She screamed and threw her free tiny fist into his gut, and kept hitting his shoulders and arms.

“Yo, chill!”

Roger laughed. “Get him, Velvet! Get him!” Elijah dodged all her hits and laughed at her, but she kept swinging. “Don’t mind him,” Roger said, chuckling, too. He grabbed Velvet’s shoulders. Velvet reared around and kicked Roger between the legs with all her might. He dropped to his knees and he wailed.

Every member of the church turned their heads to the scene. Sister Lorna elbowed through the crowd and marched right up to the three of them, and Elijah didn't skip a beat. "She kicked Roger in the nuts," he shouted, pointing at Velvet.

Sister Lorna bent down to Velvet. The old woman's face looked like a prune. Thin flaps of skin hung off her cheeks and below her eyes. Her hot breath crawled on Velvet's face. "Didn't your mother teach you how to act in church?" she said, scowling. Velvet tried to look anywhere but in her face, but there was only Sister Lorna's mauve wide-brimmed hat. "Answer me when I talk to you!" Sister Lorna demanded.

AN overwhelming sensation to cry washed over her, but she fought it back. "They were making fun of me," Velvet said. Elijah tried to help Roger get on his feet, who held his groin and froze in place like a boulder.

"Enough of this," Sister Lorna snapped. "Your mother too good to come to church, and you don't know how to act! Don't bother coming back if your mother can't come and watch you."

Velvet pleaded, but the old woman just shook her head and the flaps on her face. Velvet's tears made Sister Lorna look like a faceless blob in a halo of mauve. Another faceless blob appeared behind the hat. "What she did now?" came Mrs. Hopkins's voice from it.

The way Mrs. Hopkins' *now* punched Velvet the gut. Worse than her hunger pangs. The old widow stood and caught Mrs. Hopkins up.

"I'll have to tell your mother about this," Mrs. Hopkins said, and she pushed Velvet towards the curb. Velvet swallowed her snot and sucked back her tears. She just wanted to go home already.

“I’m sure this one is giving you plenty of practice,” Sister Lorna said, grinning at Mrs. Hopkins.

“Sure, Sister. My husband is waiting in the car.”

Velvet looked and found Mr. Hopkins sitting in his sedan. He waved at the women and frowned when he saw Velvet in tears.

“Brother Hopkins,” Sister Lorna said, edging towards his car. “I’ll be praying for you two.”

Mr. Hopkins smiled and nodded, but his eyes were glossed with confusion. “Thanks, Sister.”

“Happy Sabbath, Sister Lorna,” Mrs. Hopkins said, ushering Velvet along.

“Happy Sabbath indeed!” the elderly woman said. She waved. “You’ll soon be blessed!”

*

Mrs. Hopkins rolled down her the window and sighed. Velvet sunk into the hot leather seat in the back. She whipped with the car as it made turns and hit potholes, but she would not put on her seatbelt unless asked.

They drove along the curves of Morningside Park, then Marcus Garvey Park as they headed east. The Harlem they drove through went to the pool, had block parties with bouncy houses, held hands with their flings, and fought over something stupid during the summer. Velvet and her mother used to take the crosstown bus to church and walk back through the parks. Sometimes she would buy them shaved ice from a cart and joke that they hope Sister Lorna doesn’t catch them. All of that passed Velvet from the back seat window.

The ride home was usually just as quiet as the ride to church. She stretched her jaw, enjoying the sensation of her dry tears pulling at the fuzz on her cheeks. Mr. Hopkins’ car

interrupted a few basketball games. The boys would move to the sides of the car, panting and glistening with sweat. Veins in their long arms pulsed as they waited to resume their game.

“How you doing Velvet? Are you hot? Are you cold?” Mr. Hopkins asked, fidgeting with the knobs. She found his face cut off and staring at her through the rearview mirror.

“I’m fine,” she said. She propped her head against the window, but left streaks of grease.

“How about a Jordan almond?” Mr. Hopkins asked. He lifted the armrest and shuffled through crumbled papers. “Honey, could you help?” he said to his wife.

Mrs. Hopkins pulled out the bag of multicolored almonds. She poured some into her palm and gave some to her husband, then she held the bag out to the backseat.

Velvet had gagged the first time she ate Jordan almonds in Mr. Hopkins’ car. She had expected real candy and not something that tasted like licking plaster. She thought maybe this was the only candy Adventist could have. But she could taste its sweetness now—enjoyed how the sweet rose up understated.

“Save me some,” Mr. Hopkins said, jokingly. He had a quick smile that made him seem youthful. Velvet handed the bag back and he swerved the car a little. Mrs. Hopkins chided him. “Velvet,” he said after some time, “how is your mother?”

Velvet tucked the almond she was sucking on into her gums. “Fine,” she said, one cheek paralyzed.

“Well, I’m happy she found a job,” Mrs. Hopkins said, glancing back at Velvet. “That must have been a relief.”

“Um-hm,” Velvet muttered, looking past Mrs. Hopkins’ head. A specter of light ran across the ceiling as Mr. Hopkins set the almonds back in the console. Velvet realized it was the reflection from his watch. She watched it race across the ceiling as he reached in the bag and

popped more almonds in his mouth. She wondered how such a little thing could have so much life and made so much use out it.

“Alright, Velvet,” Mr. Hopkins said, snapping her out of her trance. They were parked in front of her building, a grey slab of weathering brick. Scaffolding, that hadn’t been used or attended to in weeks, blocked off most of the curb. Mr. Hopkins turned to face her and smiled. “Same time next week?”

Mrs. Hopkins grabbed her husband’s wrist and cleared her throat. Velvet shook her head; she tried opening the door, but it wouldn’t budge. She searched for the specter, but it was gone.

“Wait, Velvet,” Mrs. Hopkins said. She turned her face to Velvet, too. “I’m sorry about those boys. I’m going to talk to Sister Lorna. Don’t worry about what she said.” She stepped out of the car and opened Velvet’s door. “We’ll see you next week. Early. For breakfast.”

“Happy Sabbath,” Mr. Hopkins said.

“Happy Sabbath,” Velvet mumbled to them both and slid out of the car. She climbed the stoop and punched the code into the intercom. The buzzer went off. The latches clicked. Mr. Hopkins, as he had every weekend, did not drive off until Velvet was inside the building.

*

As Velvet ran up the last of six flights of stairs, her next door neighbor, Mr. Medina, unbolted his door and poked his head out. His eyes bulged at his catch. “Niña,” he said, calling to Velvet.

Velvet clutched the railing. Her door was within reach, but she knew it was rude to ignore adults.

“I’ve been trying to get a hold of your mother all day.” He wore a thin white tank-top, a ring of sweat sat along his breastbone. Over the years Velvet had known him, his muscles, which

he'd boasted of acquiring from the United States Army, had turned to fat, and his left pupil had gravitated closer to the ground.

"She's at work," Velvet stammered.

"She works?" Mr. Medina stepped out of his doorway and into the hall. He waved his pointer finger at Velvet's door. "Listen, I don't want to report you, but—that smell! It's not coming from me. I checked all over my apartment." He jabbed his pointer into the door and flared his nostrils. "Something in there is being neglected."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Medina." She stared down at her shoes.

"I don't see how you can stand it." He shook his head and retreated back into his apartment.

Velvet put her key in the door and covered her nose as soon as she stepped inside. She kicked off her shoes in the foyer and lined them up with all the other shoes. The home she shared with her mother was well lived in but cozy. All the furniture in the living room was worn and dull, but the plants her mother had collected gave the room most of its character. Majesty palms grazed the top of the ceiling. Rubber figs and snake plants sat on side tables, aloe and cacti in clay pots on the floor. The room was its own fireworks show made out of clusters of green blades. Velvet's mother had said that plants were natural air filters, but they didn't seem to work now. Velvet dropped her purse on the couch, noticed six missed calls and three new messages on the answering machine. Her hunger turned to nausea, but she went into the kitchen anyway, like a scab she couldn't help picking.

The kitchen looked onto to park where neighbors played handball and basketball. The sound of rubber pounding the cement wall and shoe scuffing pavement were as familiar as chirping birds. Velvet's mother had hung her tropical plants, which thrive in sunlight, in the

kitchen. Pitcher plants with pink bulbous flowers and an emerald ivy whose leaves were shaped like hearts. Succulents had stood in the windowsill. Rosemary, sage, and basil had poked out starter pots on a shelf above the dishrack. Her mother had brought in discarded lily bouquets and orchids for centerpieces on the dining room table—leftovers from weddings and funerals. Velvet tried to remember the kitchen the way it was before—the way her mother had loved it, but it swarmed with flies.

All the plants were on the ground covering her mother's body—an indoor burial of sorts. Velvet had tried to grab the plants in the living room, but they were either too tall or heavy for her to carry. She dared herself to look at her mother's body decorated with pink bulbs, heart-shaped leaves, and thin blades. Velvet thought she saw an engorged eyeball looking up at her through the soil, and jumped. She hid behind the box fan, then carried it on her shoulder. It blocked most of the smell and the mound of dirt from her view.

Velvet tiptoed to the cabinet, careful not to touch the body, and careful not to rip the cord out the outlet. Her heart sank as she pulled down the light box of Idaho Mashed Potatoes and shook the little matter. She opened the fridge, knowing nothing was there, just spoiled milk and rotten bell peppers. She stuck her face in the fridge, breathed in the cool, rancid air knowing it was better than her home and outside, but suddenly the lights shut off. The cool air dissolved and hum vanished. The box fan on her shoulder stopped blowing as well, but the cord was still in the outlet. Velvet fidgeted with the knobs on the stove, the buttons on the microwave, the light switches, but nothing. Not a hum of activity. Just a dead silence in the still house.

Flies attacked her face and the smell returned. Velvet wretched and ran for the window. She hopped onto the fire escape, gagging, but there was nothing to vomit. She slumped against

the iron railing, hot and thirsty and queasy, wishing Monday came sooner, so she could sneak into her public school and eat breakfast with the summer school kids.

The electric company had cut off their power before, and Velvet thought, maybe her mother's little job at the flower shop still wasn't enough. She dug her chin into her chest and dragged the slightest breeze in the thick air up her nose.

Velvet tried to remember how her mother prayed. She kneeled and pressed her forehead on the iron railing as if it were a mattress, and clasped her hands. "Please, Father, have mercy on my mother," Velvet started, but she didn't know how to continue.

She didn't know how to sound devout, how to sound well practiced like Sister Lorna. Velvet asked for the Lord to have mercy on her and her mother. She asked for forgiveness, for only coming to Him when she wanted something. If prayers worked like wishes, could she take back the countless useless ones? She imagined each word blowing in the wind. The ball dribbling below cooed as the sun lowered. Velvet heard keys jingling in the door, the familiar sound of her mother's tired feet dragging in the living room, but her mind was playing tricks on her.

As she drifted somewhere between sleep and numbness she wondered if it would be easier to join her mother. But she knew if she did that this God would not be pleased. So she hoped the wind would roll her over quietly while she slept.

The bloodshot sunset pierced through the elm trees, making the tiny figures on the basketball court silhouettes. Slow, deliberate dribbles echoed from the court. The other silhouettes ran into a shadow. Velvet wondered if they answered to someone else or knew they were better off running around the court not thinking about such things.

More silhouettes crept into the dark park, some with candles, some with children and barking dogs. She'd seen vigils gather for the deceased, young and old, but this crowd was loud and swore, unlike the quiet grief of those memorials.

Velvet wondered why the street lights hadn't turned on as people poured out of buildings. Someone banged on her door and jolted upright. She gripped the railing as the knocking became pounding, and held her breath as climbed back into the kitchen.

Velvet heard the Hopkins' voices behind the front door as soon as she stepped into the living room. She found them swallowed in the darkness of the stairwell and propped the door open just wide enough for them to be illuminated by the light from the little light in her home.

"Hey, Velvet," Mr. Hopkins said, flashing a warm smile. "We came to check on you. There's a neighborhood blackout." They had changed out of their church clothes and stood before Velvet in jeans and cotton t-shirts.

"Are you here alone?" Mrs. Hopkins said. Her hair was tied into a ponytail. She swiveled her head into the house, and Velvet brought the door tighter around her body.

"She's still at work," Velvet muttered.

Mrs. Hopkins sighed and glanced at her husband. "Well, I'm sure it's not pleasant to be here alone." Velvet hadn't noticed how high-pitched Mrs. Hopkins's voice was, nor how young and small she looked. Mrs. Hopkins pinched her nose. "It smells awful in this hallway. Good grief!"

"We don't want you staying her by yourself," Mr. Hopkins said.

Mrs. Hopkins waved her hand in her face. "Go in and pack some things," she said. She dug in her purse and pulled out a pen and a crumbled flyer, and began scribbling. "I'm gonna leave your mother a note, letting her know you're safe with us."

Velvet stared up at the smooth of their necks and their wide eyes as they strained to see in the dark. They tried to pinch the note in the door-knocker, but it kept falling to the ground.

“You got tape in there?” Mr. Hopkins asked after retrieving the fallen flyer the third time.

Velvet shook her head.

“Here.” Mrs. Hopkins said after retrieving the fallen note a third time. She handed the note to Velvet. “Put it somewhere your mother would see it. The fridge. The counter.”

“But it’s dark,” Velvet said.

Mr. Hopkins sighed. “Good point.”

“How about I come in with you and help find a place? Hmm? The trains are down and it’s going to take her a while to walk up here.”

Velvet read the flyer in her hand: *Hey Val! We got Velvet at our place, so don’t fret! You’re welcome to join us when you see this. Will check-in in the morning. --Stacy and Greg*

Velvet wondered if she would have recognized them dressed like this on the street. “Okay,” she said. She held the door open. Mrs. Hopkins handed her husband her purse and stepped inside. Mr. Hopkins smiled in the dark and shifted his feet. “You can come in too,” Velvet said. He seemed surprised, but he hopped in and pulled the door behind him. The last of the bloodshot sunset streaked through the kitchen and living room, the well-lived in home.