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It happens when I am just a crawling child, one week past my first birthday and I up and crawl right off the boat. Least, that's what mama say. She call out, 'Aiyana,' but I already under. Gone. Breathing that thick, brown river water. He pull me out like he do the snapping turtle because daddy a man of river ways. I blue, mama says. He thump my chest good and hard and some of the river come up and some stay put. They say is a miracle that I'm alive.

After, I turn to a sickly child with coughs and fevers and bruises and boils, river water still in me. Always. Nights I feel it, river suck at my throat. I am spluttering and choking like a chicken for the pot. Hetty, she be my sister, she shaking me, tell me I gotta wake up, be calm now and find my breath.

There five of us children living on the boat with mama and daddy. Hetty, she the eldest, she sixteen, then me fifteen, then Lyle, ain't hardly a year between each of us, and then the twins Eugene and Albert, they come late. All mama's time taken up with keeping us clean, with cooking and washing, and she glad of my help because I stay home. All these years I ain't walking out the Creek to the school house with the others. All these years, mama get sadder and sicker, and I stay with her and do the chores. Make the cornbread and carry the water, wash and clean, see to the chickens, cut the greens, shop and cook. Do as daddy say. According to him I ain't in need of learning. I too sick, too backward, ain't worth it. Ain't worth more than

another man's dog, he say. Never know why he hate me so much. Why he want to punish me like he do.

First time I be four and the river be high. He make me kneel and take a hold of my hair. He despise my red hair, say it be the mark of my shame. I so wish it be black like my brothers and sister. He force my head down under the water and hold it there. My lungs fill, ready to burst, stomach rocking, dark world closing in. When he let me up, I gasping like a fish on dry land. He don't even look, he walk away like it be nothing. Swear, one day the river gonna take my life. I thinking, he hold me back down one more time and I be gone.

He ain't done it for a while now, not since the time last fall. That time, the blackness close in around me. When he finish and he let me up I fighting for my breath. I lie there and I lie there but it don't come. Hetty lift my head in her lap. Mama say Lyle gotta fetch Doctor Miller quick, give me an injection like he do, though I rather the yellow powder he give me when I just small.

Daddy say we ain't got no money to be calling no doctor.

Hetty mad, more than I see ever before. I see it in her eyes. 'That is nonsense,' she say. 'You know fine well the doctor come here and ask for nothing. We are a charity case, God help us. You gotta send for him, else Aiyana she gonna die right before your very eyes. I swear no child of mine is ever gonna want for no doctor. I swear no child of mine ever gonna have a father like you. You ain't a father and that is a fact.'

Daddy step towards her but she don't move, like she saying, 'Come on then, do your worst, I daring you,' and I see there something between them more than my lungs. She been angry with him since way back when and I reckon it got something to do with the way he always coming to fetch her at night and she always pretending she asleep.

Mama don't say nothing but the twins they set up howling and Lyle he get up and say he going to fetch the doctor and nobody stopping him. Castor, his grizzly old dog, jump up and

follow him. My breath fast. Sound like the wind in my chest. I don't speak. Daddy leave.

Doctor Miller come. Look kindly. I ask him for the yellow powder but he shake his head and open up his bag and take out the syringe. He give me the injection and tell mama she gotta call him sooner next time, soon as it start. I feel the blackness come over me but my chest open and my breath come and I know Hetty and Lyle save me.

Hetty ain't got a good word to say about daddy. 'Why do you think everyone on this river is so afraid of Floyd Weir? It's because he don't care who or what he hurt. Look at mama, look what he do to her. The beatings and...' She stop, like she ain't sure what she gonna say next. 'He's got hands that don't know where they belong. He is like the fox in the chicken coop, Aiyana. You wait, you'll see. One night he will come, sure as the fox comes for its supper and...' She stop and sigh 'Soon as I get a house with Johnson,' Johnson be her beau, 'you are leaving here, you will come and live with me.' She say she gonna marry Johnson just as soon as she leave school.

I say, 'I gonna marry December Lutz, he the only man for me. Me and December, we always been sweethearts.'

'You know daddy forbid it, the Klan forbid it. If he ever find out, then most likely he'll take to holding your head under the water and he won't let up. It ain't gonna happen, Aiyana. Not ever.'

'No? Well, just you wait and see.'

No matter what anyone say, no matter what Hetty say or daddy say, I ain't giving up on December. He a woods colt child, born of ice, left frozen and dying in the reeds on the river bank. Hannah Lutz take him in. Daddy say if she'd been minding her own business it had been a better thing, child die and no one know any different. December mixed blood, that's why he left to die. Mixed blood ain't welcome on the river. Klan don't approve. But I glad to my bones Hannah Lutz save him. He

my first and only love. I never have another love like December.

We grow up together, what with him being a child of colour, half one colour, half another and not going to school like the others. And me half child, half river, we the same in that respect. I don't see the difference colour make but it sure make a difference to some folk and some folk think it a wicked thing if a white woman or a white man go with a coloured person. Hannah she don't see colour, she just see a frozen child. Got no babies of her own. Mama say only child Hannah Lutz ever have slip from her body, no breath, silent as the silvery fish in the shade of the Bluff. She make a willow cot and send it back to the river.

Cold day, mist hanging on the river. Outside, don't hardly see from one boat to another. Fish jumping and if a person so wants, he catch a whole stringer of catfish and bream on a day like today. Daddy out hunting and mama resting. The others all be at the schoolhouse where I never been. I figure I alone. Boat still in the water, rain on the roof. I on my tiptoes so as not to wake mama. Listen for her sleeping breath, it come slow. I go to the bed. Kneel on the boards by the chest she keep there, gentle so as not to wake her.

It be made of red cedar and carved with angel heads. I smooth my fingers on the angel heads, slide over curls and lips, trace feather wings. Feel for the key, lying underneath. Pull it up from the dust, wipe it clean. Put the key in the lock and turn. Chest open. I lift the lid, and there it be, the book, the book daddy say I be forbidden to touch. Say I ain't good enough to set eyes on. Is black, black bible, corners ragged, back broken. Belong to daddy's daddy who I ain't never seen. Mama say it come across the water, with the family, then handed down. Ask me, is wasted on daddy. He don't ever read it, don't even take it out from the Angel Chest.

It heavy as a rifle. Need two hands to lift. Place it on the floor. Open. Turn it soft pages. It look and feel to me like a

perfect thing. Smell of prairie grass and clover. Only trouble be I try to fathom the words but no matter how long I stare they do not show. I am like him hunting in the woods waiting for the rustle of the whitetail in the chinaberries, only nothing come. I do not know the word. The marks stay put. They be as heavy as my heart. They be my tears on the page.

The world be made of the word. How my life gonna be worth anything if I don't read? I ain't settling for just river child. Be looking for more. One day I get new clothes, not hand-me-downs, carry my case and my books, go to my work. But how I gonna get a job if I don't read? How I ever gonna know the bible for myself, the words of the songs and stories? How I gonna teach my children? It be time to stop pretending. Time to find my way out of the darkness and there be only one way.

Only one thing I want more than December and that be schooling. Even though daddy forbid it, I want it bad, wanting like a thorn buried deep under my skin. The more time run away, the more that thorn pinch and prick at me. I gotta have it. Soon. It be my only salvation. I am like mama, she ain't reading either. She say her time to learn be gone now. Ask me, mine be running out fast.

Mama stir. She talking in her sleep. I close the bible. Rest my hand there and wonder why he forbid me a thing of beauty like this. That be when I feel it. Air change, grow thick around me. Hairs on my arms standing up, skin crawl and breath quicken. Smell of sweat and blood in the room. Hunting blood. He come silent as a ghost but I know he be there. Black shadow hanging at the door. I turn and see him. Daddy. He step out of the doorway and come towards me. Got his big skinning knife hanging in his hand.

My hair fall at his feet. Fall on my feet. Lie like red grass on my legs. He do it inside. At the kitchen table. He say, 'You asked for this, child. I forbade you to touch that chest and that

bible. This is what comes when you defy me. That book got nothing to do with you and never will have.' Then he call out to mama, 'Here come see, this knife could cut butter, honed it good and proper on that bench stone.' He laugh, tug at my hair, chop, chop with the knife.

Mama stir, come slow into the kitchen then wake fast when she see what he do. 'Floyd, God have mercy, what are you doing?' She go to take his arm away. 'In God's name, stop. Floyd. I'm begging you.' He hold the knife up to her. Then push her off with his elbow. When he finish he tell her go fetch the hand mirror, make sure I get a good, proper look at myself. Then he take his knife and he go.

When she see daddy be gone, mama take the hand mirror away. Tell me not to fret, she gonna make my hair nice as she can. I reckon there ain't no mending what he do but I sit and try to catch my breath while she take her sewing scissors and cut. After, she say it ain't so bad. Hair sap your strength and I need all mine on account of my lungs.

Lyle be the first back from school, Castor his dog following on his heels. When he see me he get a shock. He say, 'Jesus Aiyana, what's up with your hair?'

'Daddy cut it,' I say. 'With his big skinning knife.'

He shake his head. He keep shaking it. 'One of these days he's gonna hurt you so bad he gonna kill you. Ain't safe for you here anymore, Aiyana,' he say. Then he turn to Castor, ruffle his back and he whisper. 'Time we were thinking of leaving, dog, and that's a fact.'

Mist gone, pale sun falling, moon rising. Dusk. Cold wind at my neck. Rain still. I tell mama I gonna take the boat and row across to grandma's. She don't stop me. Through the reeds, in the shallows, steady the boat, step in and lift the oars. Row. Rain falling round me in circles like the willow hoop of the dreamcatcher. Listen for the river calling me. Hear its voice in the way it move. Times, like the spring flood it be angry and

the waves whip up so thick it run backwards, times like summer mornings it be sweet and slow, barely move, mist rising, river of glass, everything glide and glisten, across the water grandma singing to the corn while she hoe. Times, like now, it be cast down and troubling through the moons of rain and winter. Times the river see what daddy do and it sing my sorrow.