

Blackberry's Blues

by Bren Davis

Mama told me to stay put, pressed me under the floorboards, then caressed my face with work-worn hands; calloused and raw at the fingertips. "Stay. Put." she reminded me with an edge to her tone and hummed a sorrowful blackberry blues while she tightened the dark wrap around her head in the mirror. Her head was taut as a bowstring, but her fingers were mere bones rattling in her dark skin. I didn't have the luxury of imagining this as a game, not even as she smiled down with as much reassurance as she could muster at the hole in the floorboard she knew my eye was pressed against. Blinking away the pain from stabbing splinters that scraped my brow, I pressed harder until I threatened to lift the floorboard with the tip of my nose. "Stay put" jingled around in my head like the forgotten change in my Mama's apron pocket.

A lone candle lit the room, carving shadows into the walls. They danced across Mama's face to the gradual rhythm of her haunting tune, flickering and disappearing into the knots of hair that hung out the loose headwrap she seemed unable to tighten. Then they would appear again, just a tad too late to hide the frightful tears that spilled from her eyes. Still, if I squinted just right I saw only strength in her impenetrable countenance. Her eyes met my one, pressed so firmly against the small hole in the floorboard. I traced her features with ease, eye following her blackberry lips, ripe and full even if they quivered ever so slightly under the soft glare from the lamp's constant flame. Our eyes stayed on each other.

"Stay put," she seemed to say as the door creaked open and headlights gleamed penetratingly through the doorway. Then they entered, ghastly apparitions dressed for the southern heat, starched cotton shirts unbuttoned to display sweat-soaked cobwebs sprouting from their chest. Their skin incandescent in the headlights' white-hot glare, draining the color from Mama's complexion like peeling the skin from a yam. The ghosts wasted no time, hands reaching forward like cotton white shackles that gripped my mother's wrists. They clenched vice-like into knotted kinks revealed after her headwrap was ripped away from her head. "Stay put," she said earlier and I did.

My small lifting of the floorboard revealed skeletal bones that dragged her out our modest home and into the electrified night, ripe with the unneeded blinks of firefly glow that pierced the night air just as much as the headlights. The men disappeared for a moment before appearing again stark white, denying the night's blackness as it tried to swallow their light to hide their crimes. I "stay put" even as she left her skin behind, dripping ribbons speckled with gravel as they dragged her across the rough concrete. A roar from the beastly engine and then the dramatic song's bridge was over and there was nothing but echoes from her scream-like rifts. All that was left was the carnage and the lone flame casting shadows on walls. The walls, witnesses to such violence, still provided comfort because at least they weren't bleached white.

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I picked splinters and spiders from my clothes as I walked, grateful for the chance to stretch my knees that crackled briefly to the tune of the blackberry blues when I finally rose from the floorboard hollow. But such crackles were from them simply protesting movement after

hours of undeniable obedience. I followed a path of evening primrose to Hangman's Poplar, the yellow bloom road ethereal in the dark glow. It had rained sometime early, just enough to make my clothes stick to my back like flypaper, and offer some thankful relief from the throbbing night heat. I picked the flowers as I walked, knowing I was getting closer as the cricket chirp symphony was accompanied by another instrument, a saddened harmony from the tell-all swing of a taut rope. The memory of tart blackberries was brought to my lips, the sight of stained fingers dried in the southern heat, Mama pressing ripe lips to my forehead, telling me to stay put as she ran her thin dark fingers through my hair with primrose oil until it shined in weaved braids that hung down my neck. Like Mama's body from the poplar tree.

It was then that the song had changed altogether, a new bump of bass so different from the grassroots spiritual that montaged my youth. The night threatened to burst with Mama's familiar symphony again, yet didn't, and I knew as crushed yellow blooms fell from my fingers that I would never taste the sweetly dreadful hum of the Blackberry Blues again.