

LOUISE

Cynthia Robertson

The forty-two year old, white man looked down at the woman in the hospital bed and shuddered. Her face was so battered, he could hardly recognize her. Blood oozed from an open gash between her eyes. It trickled down her nose into a dark, red gauze bandage. Her left eye had disappeared behind a mass of purple, swollen flesh. An angular, lumpy forehead protruded, large and bruised below the wispy, grey hairline; and the right side of her face was crushed in, making a hollow groove where the cheek bone had been.

"Sonny? Where am I?"

"You're in the hospital, Louise. They really got you this time." The man leaned forward against the side of the bed and covered her brown, bony hand with his white one. "Who did this to you? Was it the same men who broke in and tied you to a chair before? I was afraid this would happen." His face looked worried, but there was anger in his eyes. "You've got to move, Louise. You can't stay in that hell-hole of a neighborhood, where people just break down a door and take what they want!"

"All I remember—I was cleanin'—dustin'—an' I hear's this terrible noise. That's all I remembers. I get so confused. Seems like I stays confused most all the time. I guess I fight 'em pretty good, though. See here—see my hand. That knuckle's all scraped off where I hit 'em." She lifted a fist to show him two pink, flesh marks.

He exhaled slowly and shook his head. "What am I going to do now?" he thought. "What am I going to do with this poor, old colored woman?" For as long as he could remember she had been an ever-present part of his childhood. She had helped care for him when he was sick, and had put up with his teasing and foolishness all the years he was growing up. He loved her. But he was irritated too—irritated with her for putting him in this position and angry with society (and, yes at himself) for using people and casting them off.

"They're going to keep you here for a few days," he said. "You go to sleep now and I'll be back soon. We've got to talk about this some more. We've got to think of a way to get you into a safer place."

Two days later, the white man was back beside the hospital bed

again. Louise's head was propped up on pillows and some of the swelling in her face had gone down. She gave him a crooked, toothless smile and said, "Look at me, Sonny, my face look jes' like blueberry pie."

"How're you feeling?"

"Ma' head hurts a little—but I'm feelin' O.K. I'm 'bout ready to get back to work. When they gonna let me go home?"

"Louise, that's what I want to talk with you about. I've been thinking this over and I think it's time we moved you to an apartment where there are more people around and where there is more police protection—someplace in a better neighborhood."

"What am I gonna do with the place I got?"

"You can sell it. We ought to be able to get something for it," he said. "And then you can use that money to pay rent on a better place."

"Honey, I don't want to live in no 'partment. I love ma lil' no-count house. It's raggedy but it's paid for and, Sonny—it's all I got." She turned her head slightly and didn't look at him. "That used to be a pretty nice neighborhood back when yo' daddy help me buy that place. Why, I still got flowers out dere that yo' mama give me. 'Member when you youst ta come out ta ma' place and follow me all round de yard? You youst ta point at dem flowers an' say, 'Weez—what's dat?; Weez—what's dat?' Ma house was pretty den. And ma friends is out dere. Ol' Mr. Less and Greta. We looks out after each other."

"Maybe so, but Mr. Less and Greta couldn't help you when those men broke your door down and beat your face in could they? And it's going to happen again. Somebody knows you live alone—and they'll be back, Louise." She seemed to be thinking hard for a moment. He thought she was considering what he had said. But instead she answered:

"Seems like dey jes' don't want to leave us ol' colored folks alone no more. I gets so confused. I don't know what happen—I was sleepin', I guess, and—bang!—I thought it was thunder or sumthin'. They had those masks on they faces—an' one of um' takes he fist and hits me right here! I got ta' get home an' take care ma' place. Wonder when dey gonna' let me go home?"

The man moved uncomfortably in his chair. "She just doesn't listen," he thought. "She just won't listen to reason."

He tried again:

"Will you just look at some apartments? Maybe we can find you one with a patio where you can have some flowers. Promise me you'll just look at some places." The old lady looked at him again. She seemed to

understand the concern in his voice. Putting her hand on his arm she said, "Sonny, don't worry 'bout ol' Louise. You know if you want me to look, I'll look. After all, you is all de fambly I got. I'll do jes' what you say. But I'll be all right, you know. I'm gonna get me a gun. I sets right by ma front door in ma big ol' chair, and if dey comes, I'll blow dem right off de porch! I ain't afraid. I ain't gonna die 'til the good Lord gets ready fa' me. I ain't afraid. I only got to die once." me. I ain't afraid. I only got to die once."

When he left Louise he felt tired. As he walked through the long, cold halls of the hospital his head was down and his shoulders were slightly stooped. He felt heavy with his new burden—this strange new burden of poverty and age and helplessness.

THE PRETTIEST SOUND

Carla Stoneberg

Man, did I ever see something today. Made me wish I could do it myself in an emergency. Jonesy says certainly I could learn, so who knows? Maybe I will try to take the course.

It all started this evening when we was clearing away the supper trays in the dining room at the nursing home where I work as a nursing assistant. (That's the latest glamour word for "nurse's aide.") I was just putting a tray back in the cart when I hear Alicia, that's another nursing assistant, scream frantically, "Jonesy, come quick!"

I look over and see Alicia whapping her hand hard against the cheek of old Mr. Burns, one of the patients here, who is slumped forward onto the table where he has just finished eating. My own blood suddenly stops cold in my veins. Not spry old Charley Burns, not him! Why just last night he beat me at the quick game of checkers we played together during my coffee break. I want to run over and help him, and I can't. My feet are frozen.

But Jonesy's aren't. Jonesy comes flying into the dining room just like her nurse's hat was all wings. Before I can blink, she grabs Mr. Burns under the arms, and lowers him carefully to the floor. When he is all laid out flat on his back, I can see his face. It is the color of ripe purple plums.

I guess Jonesy sees it too. She gets down on her knees beside him and puts her cheek close to his nose. Guess she doesn't feel no breathing