

Carl has done something bad. The law should be told about it, but Mr. Holland decides at the last minute that because all involved are black it is better to keep the law out. He knocks on the front door at 3 a.m., and when Carl's father opens the door, he shoves the boy at him like a weapon. Carl stands defiantly while his mother tries to search his eyes; he keeps them lowered, but his head is raised and even cocked a little to one side. Mr. Holland wants to turn right around and go back without further explanation—"That boy don't need to come up to our house anymore"—but Edward won't let him. He speaks angrily to this man he has known almost since childhood. He wants to know what his son has done this time.

Olivia stands at the stair landing; the people below, talking in angry yet hushed voices so as not to awaken the rest of the family, cannot see her. She waits with

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them for Mr. Holland to speak, but when he does she cannot make out the words. His voice is too low and it trembles with either fury or shame.

And all the time Carl does not move, the cool night wind does not even cause him to shiver.

For all his anger, Mr. Holland cannot bring himself to say certain things. He only manages to make it quite clear that tomorrow his youngest boy, the one Carl's age, is being sent up North with his older brother. Edward opens his mouth to demand once more, but Mr. Holland has spun on his heels and is gone. And almost in the same instant Carl breaks away from his parents and runs toward the stairs. Olivia barely has time to move back into the darkness, for the last thing that she wants is for him to see her. But he does not even hesitate at the foot of the stairs and almost collides with his sister, standing there unmoving like the rest of the family. He stops for just a second opposite her, and in the moon's light Olivia can see the look that the girl gives her brother. His reaction to it is

to spit on her. Olivia closes her eyes then and wishes intensely that she was back in her own home in her woman's arms. One more week and she can go.

She rests beside the window for a minute, looking at the stillness outside and in spite of herself wishing that she knew what Carl did tonight. But it is just morbid curiosity and she shakes her head to cast it off. She hears her brother's and sister-in-law's sharp whispers as they ascend again to their room. For an instant she freezes, believing that they won't see her there in the corner beside the window (like in a game of hide-and-go-seek). But this feels silly—she is forty years old—so she moves away. When they see her on the landing they apologize for the noise awakening her; but they keep their eyes lowered, and she does not bother to look at them either.

She goes into the kitchen and directly to the back door to open it and just stand there a while with her nose taking in the sharp freshness of the air. Night sounds are tapering into stillness and she does

When the Time Came

By Pat Suncircle

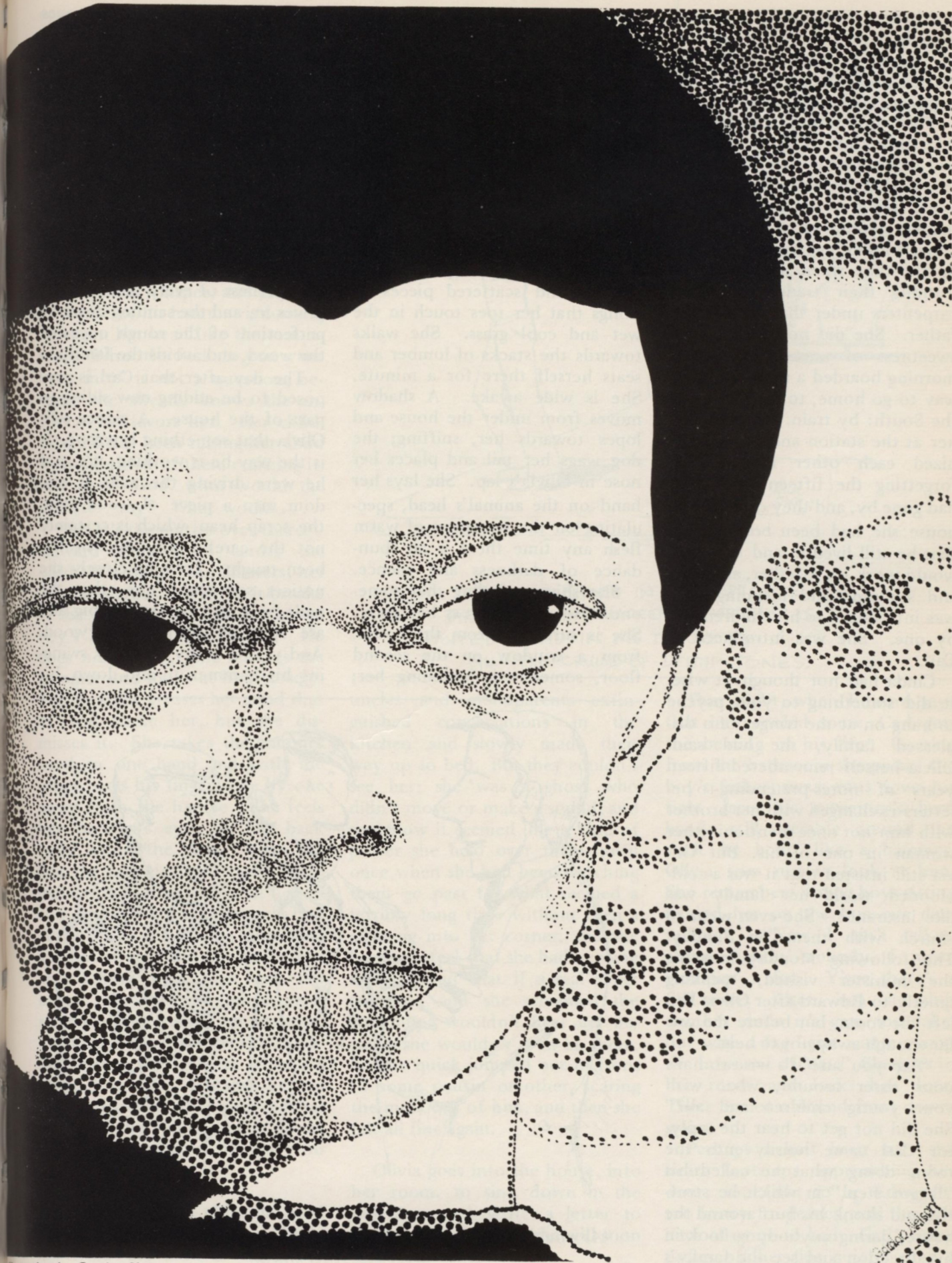


Illustration by Gordon Nelson

not hear a thing until her woman slips back into her mind; and then the sound of Cinda's voice, the texture more than the words, fills her head. One more week.

The visit wasn't supposed to take this kind of turn. Edward had mentioned in one of his brief letters that he was going to go to work fixing up the old house and maybe adding on a new room. Olivia's mind had begun conjuring up the time when they were just learning their trade, apprentice carpenters under the eye of their father. She did not question the sweetness of nostalgia and one morning boarded a train—the only way to go home, to travel back to the South: by train. Edward met her at the station and they recognized each other immediately, forgetting the fifteen years that had gone by, and they came to the house she had been born in and that he still lived in and that they would work on together, admiring and studying and mending. She was introduced to his children one by one. She was introduced to Carl.

Cinda had not thought it wise. It did something to your psyche to hang on at the fringes of a displeased family, she had said. Olivia herself remembered fifteen years of notes-pretending-to-be-letters exchanged with her brother with him not once mentioning her woman in one of his. But Olivia still insisted that it was a cold-blooded world—her family was like insurance. She even went to church with them on Sunday. The following Monday morning the minister visited, speaking quietly to Edward after Olivia had left the room, but before she was far enough away not to hear.

"Are you sure it's wise to have your sister around, what with your young children and all?" She did not get to hear the reply, for Carl came noisily into the room doing what he called his "faggot step," in which he strutted and shook his butt around the house, daring anybody to look in his direction and see the family's

only son doing what they said sissys did. Nobody said a word. Everybody found other things to do. The silence, as Carl wanted it to be, was deafening. In the midst of such theatrics he would sometimes smile at Olivia out of the corner of his mouth, but she never smiled back; she avoided him like the plague.

Olivia walks out into the yard, carefully stepping around the pebbles and scattered pieces of things that her toes touch in the wet and cool grass. She walks towards the stacks of lumber and seats herself there for a minute. She is wide awake. A shadow moves from under the house and lopes towards her, sniffing; the dog wags her tail and places her nose in Olivia's lap. She lays her hand on the animal's head, speculating on the sweetness of warm flesh any time there is an abundance of darkness and silence.

She shivers, feeling that someone has walked across her grave. She is sure that from the house, from a window on the second floor, someone is watching her;

but as much as she strains her eyes she cannot make out a face. The feeling goes on—someone's gaze like a kind of heat against her, following her—until she is back inside the house. She goes to her room and locks the door.

All the next day Carl does not say a word to anyone, and Edward does not trust himself enough to speak to the boy. Olivia concentrates on the precise lengths of the lumber to be measured and cut, the sureness of every nail that she drives in, and the sanding down to perfection of the rough edges of the wood, and avoids the family.

The day after that Carl is supposed to be adding new siding to part of the house. A glance tells Olivia that something is wrong. It is the way he is working; it's as if he were driving the nails at random into a piece of wood from the scrap heap, which is certainly not the careful way that he has been taught. Looking closely she notices something else, that the nails he is driving are too big and are splitting the delicate wood. And yet he is rhythmically swinging his hammer up and down, his

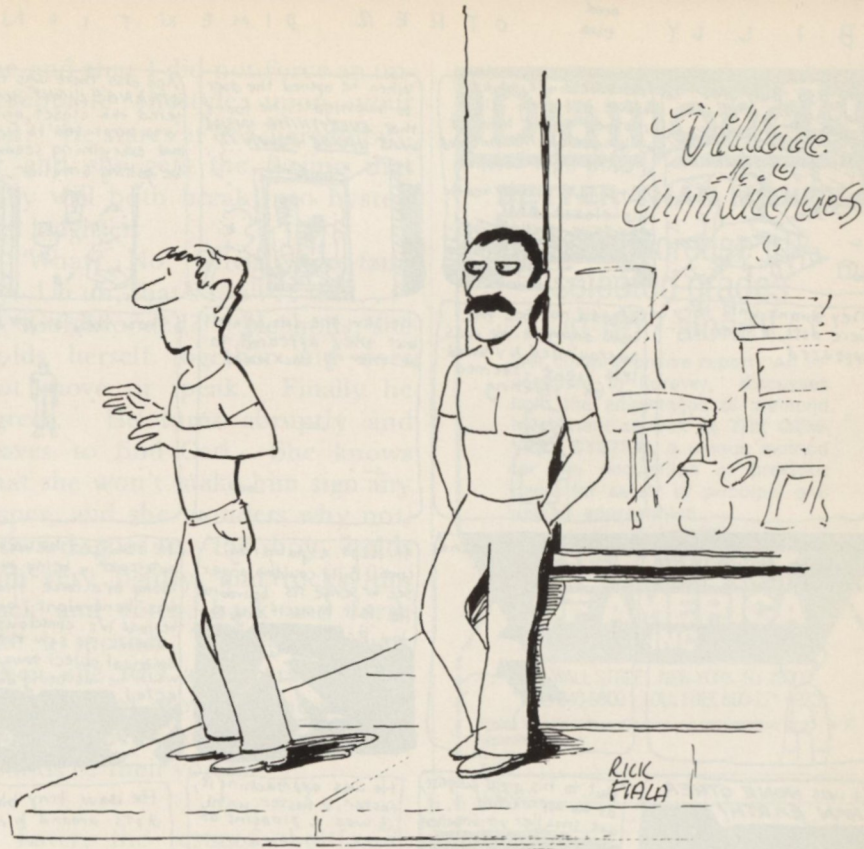


"As you know, I've been living in a ménage à trois. I'd like you to meet my other third."

eyes lowered over the damage he is doing. She runs over, calling to him, "You have made a mistake, Carl, you're ruining the wood." He jerks his head up angrily and stops her. He doesn't say a word, and she can't, so they just stand there staring at each other. Finally, he looks back down at the wood he is ruining—and continues to hammer in the oversize nails. She tells him that his father will be mad, but her voice is not much more than a whisper, and anyway the noise of his hammer is coming down on her head like the tool itself. "What the fuck do you want from me!" is not a question, because she already knows the answer. He favors her. Her child, Edward has been raising her child without either of them realizing it. Her child—God, what would the minister say? What would . . .

"What's the matter over there?" Edward calls from across the yard. "Nothing," she answers, her voice ludicrous and shrill; it breaks as she grabs for the hammer in the boy's hand. "I'll finish it." He does not let go. She releases the hammer and looks at him closely. The thought crosses her mind that he will strike her, but she dismisses it. She takes the hammer head in one hand and with the other peels his fingers one by one away from the handle. She feels her brother's eyes on her back from across the yard. When she has the hammer she stands there expecting Carl to leave, but he settles himself back to watch her. Already she is sweating more than she has all day and her underarms are itching with heat and her butt. . . He does not move, he is stretched out leaning on one arm, his head cocked to one side, looking at her, she feels, as if she's a grade-B movie. It takes her an hour to repair the mess he has made of the siding, and it seems that not once does he move his eyes from her.

When she was a child she used to hide on the stair landing watching from the dark as aunts and



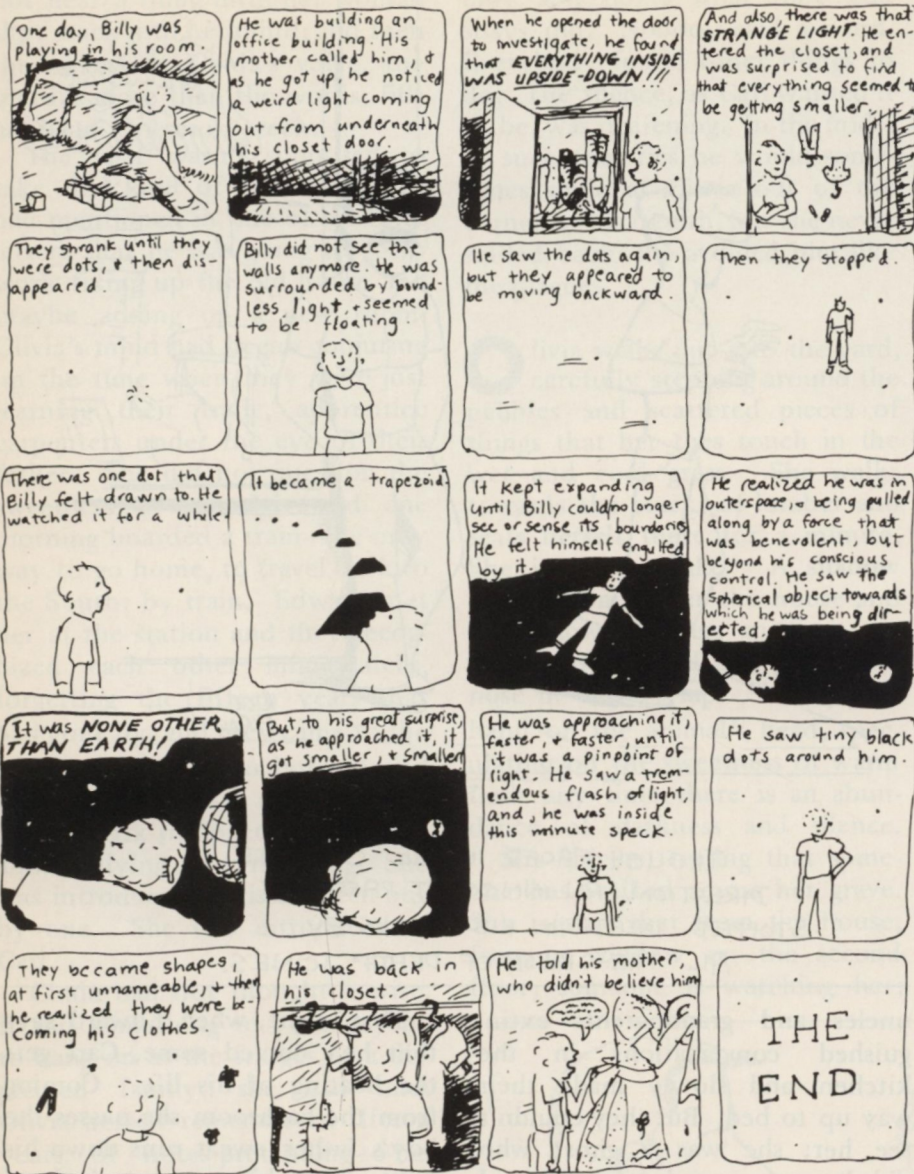
THOUGH FACED IN THE OPPOSITE
DIRECTION, AN INNOCENT PASSERBY IS
STOPPED DEAD IN HIS TRACKS BY
AL "THE-CRUISE-OF-DEATH" JONES.

uncles and grandparents extinguished conversations in the kitchen and slowly made their way up to bed. But they couldn't see her; she was a ghost who didn't move or make a sound, and somehow it seemed like a kind of power she held over them—until once when she had been watching them go past for what seemed a terribly long time without even a glancing into her corner, and she began to feel that she had become invisible and that if a real ghost appeared and she screamed the grown-ups wouldn't hear her because she wouldn't even be there. So she quick jumped out in front of some cousin or other, scaring the mess out of him, and then she felt all fine again.

Olivia goes into the house, into her room, to sink down in the quietness and write a letter to Cinda telling her that she will soon be home.

That night, when Edward says that he's cooled some, Carl gets the beating of his life. Coming from the bathroom she passes the boy's father; sweat runs down his tight face, his carpenter's hard hands still tremble around the stick he holds like a hammer. Olivia tries not to look at him. She remembers young boys sitting behind her on the bus one day, talking: "Naw I ain't talkin' about fightin' nobody, I mean stompin' a fag. Y'see there's a diff'rence, y'get into it with another dude it's give and take, but with a fag I jest wanta stomp the mess out of 'um." She goes to her room and locks her door. There is not a sound from downstairs.

Perhaps a half hour later she hears footsteps approaching her door: too light to be Edward's, too heavy for Jessica, and the girls have all gone to bed. Carl's name passes off her lips quieter than a



to turn out this way. She had tried to avoid him. But he made a point of sitting next to her whenever she came down to meals, and when she was busy working he would come and ask questions about carpentry, because that is what he wanted to be too, and questions about where she lived and, if she was reading, questions about the book. And then the silences between his words would lengthen and he would stumble and go back to start again, but something tight would catch in her chest and make her cut her replies to nods and monosyllables. But he still came on like she was the only one in the room. She avoided him because she did not want arguments with her brother, not now, after fifteen years, not after coming home. So finally he stopped talking to her, but he still did not leave her alone.

She happens to look up and sees someone coming. It is far enough away still to be nothing but a figurine in blue, but she knows that it is Carl. Her hands are shaking. She looks at them not believing it, thinking about dexterity. Twenty years a carpenter trains your hands—the detail work, the power kneaded out. She pushes her hands together and looks up again and he is closer, not looking at her but coming directly to her. She stands quickly and walks away from the river. She does not look for the path back but cuts her own way through the high weeds. Snakes are here, but it really doesn't matter because of her own presence in the grass. Blacksnake. Cold-blooded and waiting for the innocent youth, cowering beneath the minister's voice and slinking from his father's stick. It might have brought laughter at one time. A feeling of nausea expands in her stomach as she speculates on how cleverly it has been planted in her mind that she is dangerous. Like a small electronic device planted there in the night when she was sleeping and now she runs...

She knows that she should stop,

breath. But she decides immediately that she cannot answer her door if he knocks. Remember. There had been disapproving looks from Cinda—"...and stay away from them kids, you know how funny folks are."

But the footsteps come directly up to her door and stop and there is not another sound—no knock, no retreat, nothing. She swallows at the dryness in her throat and looks at the bottom of the door, but nothing comes under it. Minutes pass... five, ten, no sound... fifteen, nothing. She rushes over angrily and throws her door open and there is no one there. So then she slams it with a force that jars the house.

The next morning, early, she

is standing beside the river that runs along the edge of her brother's property. The silence here makes her linger and feeds her thoughts. A good kind of silence down here, not a fearful one. Cinda, her city woman, would never believe the silence. She has not been this close to the river, it seems, for decades; the other shore used to look miles and miles away, but today the deep summer foliage and even the wood on the beach moves into sharp focus as the mist burns away. The baptism spot. Sisters and brothers drenched and wrapped in white clothing led trembling out of the water to a new day... Her thoughts run on, coasting the stillness. The visit was not supposed

let Carl catch up, let him talk, cry, anything to end the absurdity of their hide-and-go-seek. He favors her. He is hers. She looks back over her shoulder and he is still coming so she hurries on.

It is evening. Below her window Carl is playing with a soccer ball; Olivia stands watching him for a while in spite of herself. His movements are sure and quick, the ball never gets out of his control. There is no sign of the beating the night before as he moves about—as gracefully defiant, she thinks, as she in loving another black woman for twenty years. Always tests of skill. Her gaze still on him, she shakes her head regretfully and speaks aloud to herself. "I'll tell Cinda about him, maybe he can visit us . . . maybe . . ." It is as if he has heard her clearly, for he looks up directly into her eyes. He does not smile for once, or speak or go into his little faggot step, he just stands there, his foot on the ball, staring at her. Then he suddenly gives the ball a vicious kick and sends it flying at her, and she barely has time to jump aside before it crashes through the window. She stares down at him and his expression has not changed—and he does not move. There is not a sound in the house for a minute, and then Edward appears from the sheds. He does not go for the boy, who still stands beneath the window, but passes by him and comes into the house and is soon inside her door.

"What the fuck!" The curse slips out easily; in her terror she is neither a lady nor an aunt.

"Do something about him."

"You're his father."

"You're . . . like he is," he says, his voice stumbling and gasping like Carl's.

"Do what?"

"Do anything."

"I'm scared."

"He's your nephew . . . of what?"

"That's not what I mean. Will you sign a paper saying you asked

me and that I did not force an unacceptable lifestyle upon your son?" He stares at her incredulously and she gets the feeling that they will both break into hysterical laughter.

"What? No. Olivia, we're family. Uh uh, that's too . . . too . . ."

"Coldblooded?" He nods; she holds herself together and does not move or speak. Finally he agrees. He turns abruptly and leaves to find Carl. She knows that she won't make him sign any paper, and she wonders why not. Edward goes to the boy, holds him very tightly, and rocks him back and forth, back and forth like a mother. She remembers when she was a girl, remembers the hands of grown women brushing away her tears, remembers the sounds of their voices.

Later, the rest of the family having chosen to leave them alone, Carl leans a chair back against the wall, sits on it with his legs wrapped around the chair's and keeps in a myriad of questions that he cannot yet put into words. His shyness has returned and he haltingly tells her of the night he said goodbye to Mr. Holland's son. No one knew he was in the house, he says. He was lying in bed next to the boy and the time came for him to leave and he wouldn't, and the boy got mad, but Carl was holding him and wouldn't let him go, so then the boy started to fight, but Carl still held him and tightened his arm around his throat and his legs around his waist, and they were making so much noise that Mr. Holland came in and the boy tried to tell his father that he was fighting Carl, but Carl just laughed because he was so angry and wanted so much more time with the boy, but the boy was leaving so it didn't matter anymore. And then he cursed out his father's friend and that hadn't mattered either. He waits, then he talks to Olivia again and she listens and listens. Carl lonely, Carl terrified, Carl angry has managed to save them both. ■

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