

RED AT THE BONE

1.

But that afternoon there was an orchestra playing. Music filling the brownstone. Black fingers pulling violin bows and strumming cellos, dark lips around horns, a small brown girl with pale pink nails on flute. Malcolm's younger brother, his dark skin glistening, blowing somberly into a harmonica. A broad-shouldered woman on harp. From my place on the stairs, I could see through the windows curious white people stopping in front of the building to listen. And as I descended, the music grew softer, the lyrics inside my head becoming a whisper, I knew a girl named Nikki, guess you could say she was a sex fiend.

No vocalist. The little girl didn't know the words. The broad-shouldered woman, having once belted them out loud while showering, was now saved and refused to remember them. Iris wouldn't allow them to be sung and Malcolm's brother's sweet seven-year-old mouth was full. Still, they moved through my head as though Prince himself were beside me. I met her in a hotel lobby masturbating with a magazine.

And in the room, there was the pink and the green of my grandmother's sorority, the black and gold of my grandfather's Alpha brothers-gray-haired and straight-backed, flashing gold-capped teeth and baritone A-Phi-A! as I made my entrance. High-pitched calls of Skee-wee answering back to them. Another dream for me in their calling out to each other. Of course you're gonna pledge one day, my grandmother said to me over and over again. When I was a child, she surprised me once with a gift-wrapped hoodie, pale pink with My Grandmother Is An AKA in

bright green letters. That's just legacy, Melody, she said. I pledged, your grandfather pledged-

Iris didn't.

A pause. Then quietly, her lips at my ear, That's because your mama isn't legacy.

This, I whispered back to her, quoting her sorority mantra, is a serious matter.

My grandmother laughed and laughed.

Look back at me on that last day in May. Finally sixteen and the moment like a hand holding me out to the world. Rain giving way to a spectacular sun. Its rays speckling through the stained glass, dancing off the hardwood floors. The orchestra's music lifting through the open windows and out over the block as though it had always belonged to the Brooklyn air. Look at me. Hair flat-ironed and curling over my shoulders. Red lipstick, charcoaled eyes. The dress, Iris's dress, unworn in her closet until that moment. Already, when it was time for her ceremony, I was on my way. Already, at nearly sixteen, her belly told a story a celebration never could. My grandfather's oversize dress shirts backdropping the baby fat still pouting her cheeks, the fine lanugo hair still clinging to the nape of her neck. Still, that afternoon, the years that separated us could have been fifty-Iris standing at the bottom of the stairs watching me. Me looking away from her. Where was I looking? At my father? My grandparents? At anything. At anyone. But her.

Earlier that day, she came into my room as I pulled stockings over my thighs, attempted to clip them to an ivory gartered corset. These too had once belonged to her-unworn, still boxed and wrapped with tissue paper. The fragile stocking struggling against being locked into the garter-this I had learned from my grandmother-and she from her mother and on back-mine the only ceremony skipping a generation of mothers showing daughters. This-the corset wearing, the garters, the silk stockings-was as old as the house my father and I shared with my grandparents. This ritual of marking class and time and transition stumbled back into the days of cotillions, then morphed and morphed again until it was this, some forgotten ancestor's gartered corset-and a pair of new silk stockings, delicate as dust.

I guess you win this round, she said. Prince it is.

I looked up at her. The evening before she'd twisted her hair into tight pin curls, and standing before me, she began to pull them loose, her thick reddish hair springing into coils down over her ears. The baby fat long gone from her cheeks, replaced by high, stunning bones. I pressed my hand against my own face, felt the same structure beneath my skin.

I didn't know it was a competition, Iris.

Once, a long time ago, she was Mommy and I held her neck, her arms, her belly tight with dimpled baby hands. I remember that. How I reached and reached and reached for her. Mommy. Mommy. Mommy.

The dress, white and unworn, lay spread out on the bed beside me. Behind it, a framed poster of Rage Against The Machine's

1997 concert. My father and I went because Wu-Tang was opening. I was twelve then and the two of us yelled and rapped and cheered so hard, we both stayed home the next day drinking lemon-honey tea to nurse our sore throats. The poster was professionally framed-the red letters against a gray matte, the oversize black frame picking up the muted colors of the black-and-white photograph. Beside it, another poster. If someone said choose between your mom and dad, I wouldn't need to blink. Wouldn't stutter. I'd run like a little kid and jump into my daddy's arms.

Feels like it's always a competition these days. Somewhere along the way, I became your enemy. She pressed her hand to her throat and held it there, her fingers gently moving across her collarbone as though she were checking to see if it remained intact. A gold bracelet slid down away from her wrist. Tiny diamonds catching the light. I swallowed, at once envying and adoring all the ways in which the word lovely could refer to my mother. So strange still, how different we were.

I had given up on trying to negotiate the stockings into the ridiculous garters and was just sitting there staring at her, elbows on my thighs, hands hanging down.

I don't get it. This is my ceremony and you're trying to be stuck about the music. You blew yours, remember-

No, the baby in my belly blew mine. Remember?

Don't even, Iris. Then for a moment, like so many times before this, I lost the words. Watched them drop . . . No. Dissipate . . . from the air between us. Dissipate. The word had shown up on

my SAT prep tests again and again until it landed in this room with us. Between my mother. And me. Don't even. I didn't ask to be born. I didn't say-I didn't say do what you and my dad were doing. You could have waited.

Iris raised an eyebrow at me. I know you're not trying to have some kind of abstinence conversation with me.

You could have. There wasn't some rush to do what you guys did.

You mean have sex? Can you really not even say it? Sex, Melody. It's just a three-letter word.

I can say it. I just don't need to right now.

And if we had . . . waited, as you say. Where would you be?

You regret the hell out of me.

Don't curse. I don't regret you. I couldn't imagine this world without you in it.

Then what is it?

She came over to the bed, sat down on the other side of the dress, and ran her hand longingly over it. There were crocheted white flowers at the wrist. The attached train had alternating silk and satin panels. The seamstress had already been working on it for months before my grandparents found out Iris was pregnant. By the time she started showing, the dress was almost

done and paid for.

I don't know . . . , she said more to the dress than to me. It's Prince. It's my parents. It's your father. It's me. It's you already sixteen now. Where did all those years go? It's crazy.

There was a catch in her voice I didn't want to hear. Didn't want to deal with. Not now. Not on my day.

It's just Prince, for fuck's sake! It's not like I'm asking to walk in to N.W.A. or Lil' Bow Wow-

Stop cursing, Melody. You're better than that. And N.W.A., Lil' whatever . . . I don't even know what you're saying. She didn't look at me, just continued to run her hand back and forth over the dress. We had the same fingers, long and thin. Piano fingers, people said. But only she played.

I'm just saying it's Prince. And it's my ceremony and he's a genius so why are we even still talking about it? You already nixed the words. Let me at least have the music. Daddy doesn't care. He likes Prince too. Jeez!

For too long we said nothing. There was something moving through me like a razor in my chest-I didn't know then if it was rage or sadness or fear. Maybe Iris felt it too because she moved closer to me, rested her hand on the back of my neck, and pressed her lips into my hair. I wanted more, though-a hug, a kindness whispered into my ear. I wanted her to tell me I was beautiful,

that she didn't care what music played, that she loved me. I wanted her to laugh with me about the ridiculousness of garters and stockings.

But instead, she got up, went over to the window, and pulled the curtain back. She stared down at the block as she freed the rest of her curls. It was gray out, drizzling. Downstairs, the orchestra had arrived. I could hear bows being pulled across violins. Could hear my grandfather playing Monk on the piano and imagined his dark fingers, knotted at the knuckles.

Do you like Malcolm?

She turned back to me. Her skin creased at the brow, her eyes-eyes I'd prayed for as a child, Please God let me wake up with Mommy's pretty amber eyes-red-veined now. Please God don't ever let me have eyes like her eyes are right now.

Malcolm? Sure. Yeah. He's still such a sweetie. She looked at me, her mouth turning up into a half smile.

What?

What exactly are you asking me, Melody?

Do you like him . . . for me? Do you think he's a good- I don't know.

I looked up at her. Who else was there to ask who had lived through it all? From beginning to baby. First kiss to hands on a

body to sex. How did you even begin it? Keep it going? Wasn't it supposed to be now that she gave me the answers. Told me everything?

You guys have known each other since you were in diapers and he's always been . . . I mean, isn't he?

Isn't he what?

Nothing. Never mind. She put her hands up, surrendering. He seems, she said again, smiling. You just don't seem . . . his type.

Like you would know anything about him. Or me.

Like I said, I've known that boy since he was in diapers.

Yeah, Iris. Both of us were in diapers a long time ago.

We got quiet. Maybe all over the world there were daughters who knew their mothers as young girls and old women, inside and out, deep. I wasn't one of them. Even when I was a baby, my memory of her is being only halfway here.

I hid you from them, you know, she said-like she was looking into my head finally. Seeing something there. That's how you got here. They were hella good Catholics back then, but you would have been dust.

From who?

Whom, Melody. It's whom.

I was starting to sweat beneath the corset.

Your grandparents. Your beloved grandparents.

You didn't know. You told me you didn't know.

I never said I didn't know. I said I didn't know what to do.

She stopped talking suddenly and looked at me. Hard.

Is your period regular?

What . . . yeah! What the heck, Iris?

She exhaled. Shook her head. Okay, so if you have a regular period and then it just stops and it's not stopping because you're suddenly a super athlete or something-then you're probably pregnant. I'm just saying that to you in case no one else does-

I covered my ears. I'm good. Don't need to hear this. Not today. Not from you. Thanks.

No one ever said it to me. That's why I'm saying it to you. We can talk about this. By the time I was four months pregnant,

what I didn't know was that on the other side of pregnancy there was Motherhood.

Of course it was, I said.

Of course it is, she said. I know that now.

How could you not know- You know what- Never mind. I don't get you.

The orchestra was warming up with "Jeannine, I Dream of Lilac Time." I could hear my grandfather singing the words along with Malcolm's little brother. One voice high. The other low. One voice young and unsure, the other old and clear and deep. I closed my eyes for a minute. The song was older than everyone in the house. When the trumpeter picked up a solo and the music lifted past where the voices had just been, I felt like my ribs were shattering. There was so much in all of it. Just. So. Much. I wanted to say to Iris, It all feels like it's trying to drift out into somebody's eternity. But when I looked up at her again, she was biting the edge of her thumbnail, her left eyebrow jumping the way it did when she was stressing.

I told Aubrey, she said, moving her finger away from her mouth and studying it. And then both of us made believe it wasn't happening for a few months. Because we were kids thinking that if we ignored it, it would go away. I hid you until I couldn't anymore, wearing your granddad's button-down shirts, telling him it was the style.

Did you want to miscarry me?

I was a child, Melody. I was younger than you are now! I wanted to see you born. I wanted to hold you. I was stunned that it was true-that you could have sex with someone and that sex could make another human.

I tried to imagine her in my grandfather's clothes. Everything about her was feminine and tailored and perfect. Everything about her felt the opposite of me. I could imagine me in my grandfather's clothes. But not her.

I wanted you. I wanted you growing in my body, I wanted you in my arms, I wanted you over my shoulder-

She got quiet.

And then the wanting was gone, wasn't it?

She shook her head. More time passed before she spoke again.

It wasn't gone. Just different. You're going to learn this. I mean, I hope you learn this. Love changes and changes. Then it changes again. Today, the love is me wanting to see you in that dress, she said. I want to see me in you because Me in that dress was over a long time ago. Sixteen was gone. Then seventeen, eighteen-all of it.