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## Road to Wingo

by LaShonda Katrice Barnett

Edrow Bodine stared into his oatmeal. From the small red box he shook loose a steady stream of raisins and stirred. He thought oatmeal the perfect metaphor for his life: there were things you could add to make it taste better but in the end you still had oatmeal. Growing up in Paducah, despite his preference for corn flakes or farina, mother always made oatmeal during the cold months. He recalled watching from his bedroom window as mother, having bid good morning to the mares, left the barn with a pail of oats in tow. The sight never failed to inspire dread. To begin with, like every growing boy he awakened with the appetite of a whale—could hardly wait to eat. But crimped oats are just squashed a bit to crack the hull—harder to chew and better for a colt's teeth—which meant mother had to steam them until the hulls opened up. After steaming, she washed them carefully before she cooked them. It took an hour for the bowl of gruel to make it to the table. Edrow and his four brothers often asked why they just couldn't buy oatmeal at the Piggly Wiggly like everybody else. Papa maintained that his sons were no better than his horses. Evidently, he had been right. Now, since Edrow's last physical pointed to a 300-plus cholesterol level, oatmeal had become an all-calendar food.

While stirring, Edrow read the date on the *Murray Times & Ledger*. In a couple of weeks, his youngest would turn 19, the age he had been when he left home. Back then, leaving seemed the thing to do. His younger brothers would stay behind to run the Bodine Breeding Ranch but his older brothers had gone away and he should follow their lead, even if he had no gumption for where or why. On their fourth or fifth date when Wihelmina suggested they marry and move to Wingo, Edrow was relieved. Mina knew how to take care of things. You could see that by the care and thought that went into her plans during their courtship. Edrow dumped a spoonful of sugar onto two blocks of melting butter, looking back with his mind's eye. He deserved a prize for the way he had hidden his disappointment when Mina chose a house for them quite similar to the one he'd grown up in. In the new house, in the new life known as marriage, sex offered nothing in the way of thrills. They were each other's first but instead of excitement, the unbridled exploration even the bonobos seemed to have on the Discovery channel, lovemaking with Mina felt familiar and safe, like the sex one looked forward to in their dotage—comfort in the place where passion used to be. Neither did the births of his children bring feelings of awed happiness. On three occasions his arms were the first to hold the sixth generation of Bodines, yet he felt heaviness not the pride he believed belonged to new fathers. When he thought about it, Edrow had never felt in power or control like the king of his own castle—more like a serf bound to small town life.

Mina rolled her eyes at the gelatinous film in her husband's bowl as she snapped open the *Murray Ledger & Times*.

"You're some magician, Edrow. Turned a perfectly healthy meal into a

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heart attack.”

If it wasn't so dry, I wouldn't have to drown it with these extras, he thought, grateful still that the Quaker Oats required far less chewing than the groats of his youth. Parched after a night of open-mouthed snoring, he was hardly up for a long chew.

“The Kentucky Department of Public Health said yesterday that 19 birds from eight counties had tested positive for the West Nile Virus,” Mina read aloud. “...None of the birds come from our county but Hardin's getting pretty close. Says here the West Nile Virus is spread to bir—.”

A slurping hiss brought Edrow's eyes up from his bowl. Mina dropped the paper and grabbed the table as a searing pain shot beneath the right side of her rib cage to her back.

“You ever gonna have that looked at?”

“I was at the doctor's earlier this month. It's nothing. Just a twinge that comes and goes sometimes, that's all.”

“Seems like it comes more than it goes.”

“Eat your oatmeal.” After a few minutes Mina picked up the newspaper. “The West Nile Virus is spread to birds, humans, horses and other mammals through the bite of infected mosquitoes. The Department of Public Health says the risk of contracting the virus is very low but urges Kentuckians to take precautions against mosquito bites by wearing long-sleeved shirts and long pants and using mosquito repellent. Now how do they expect us to make it through the summer wearing long-sleeved shirts? Better pick up some of that *Off* next time we're at the Safeway. Remind me.” She read the time from the small clock face in the abdomen of a wooden Clydesdale on the wall above her husband's head. “You better scoot, Ed. As usual you'll be late.” She pushed away from the table, rising slowly from her chair.

Edrow worried a little. It had been a while since he'd seen Mina lift a thirty-pound bag of fertilizer from the trunk of the car, fling it over her back and carry it fifty feet from their driveway to her greenhouse in the backyard. Proof that she was a feistier 56 than he. He wondered if the pain had anything to do with her added weight. This year fifteen pounds, and ten before that at the start of menopause. Not that he minded. She was solid in the middle and he liked that. It comforted him when he flung an arm over the soft bulge at night.

Mina shuffled to the kitchen in dingy pink slippers coming apart at the sole, an armful of dishes clattering. “Come on now, Ed. Get a move on. You ought to get tired of them calling the house for you.”

Today, because his wife had placed it on top of the *Redbook* pile, Edrow remembered to take “The Best of Patsy CD” their eldest, Franny,

had given him for his birthday. He stopped in the foyer, looked out the screen door and watched a pair of juncos perched on the edge of the birdbath. He gave himself the once-over in the hallway mirror: dark brown Rockport shoes neatly tied, brown polyester pants and a peach short-sleeved drip dry shirt. The lower half never changed but he looked to remind himself which of the sherbet-colored shirts (bought by Mina) he was wearing today.

"You look fine," Mina called from behind, flipfopping toward him with a car cup brimming with freshly brewed coffee.

"Can you put this thing in for me? I never know what I'm doing," Edrow whined.

Mina tugged at her blue gown, more like a gauze screen barely covering the pendulous breasts resting on a pudgy stomach. "I can't go out like this." She shoved the cup at him. "Let me grab my housecoat. That's your problem Ed. You just never try."

Outside she snatched a cobweb from the Japanese sedge that bordered the front porch. In the driveway, landscaped like the curve of a crescent moon, or a frown, sat a white Ford Taurus with 753-TAXI, *Mayfield Radio Cab, Inc.*, on the driver's door. Edrow got into the car, put on his seatbelt and waited. Mina opened the passenger door, tapped the power button, and gave a gentle push of the CD into the stereo.

"Thank you."

She leaned over to kiss him, one breast brushing his hairy forearm. "It's nothing. See you soon. Be careful."

Heading east along Interstate 45 to the city of Mayfield, Edrow drummed his thumbs against the airbag, joining Patsy at the chorus: "*I say Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining. Shine on the one that's gone and left me blue.*" From the looks of things outside his car window nothing ever shined on Wingo. No coal mines, factories, or well-known horse breeders to boast, Wingo was the steptown of southwest Kentucky. The town had no schools or libraries, no museums or historic sites. Edrow had joked with his kids that it was a wonder their town even had a name but never in earshot of Mina. She could tell you all about Jerman Wingo who had donated the land for the railroad depot in the late nineteenth century. Her hands fluttered when she told the story of The Wingo Trail, or the plan for it, the 2.5 mile stretch that was supposed to connect Wingo to the big city of Mayfield but only existed on archived zoning maps in Graves County Historical Society. For Mina and other loyal Wingites the glory of their town was that they had just enough. Fulton, the next town over, had schools enough for all the children in Wingo, so why should they build their own? Pryorsburg had Little Obion Presbyterian Church, which had saved Wingo's 582 souls and had recently added a wing to accommodate new sinners should they come to town. And when the struggle on earth was over, Mr.

Brown, Pryorsburg's undertaker, threw everyone the same going away party.

After a real breakfast of two egg McMuffins, Edrow dialed in to dispatch. As suspected, the voice on the other end said, "No meeting today, Ed." The always-canceled Monday meetings alerted drivers of new roads or planned construction that might impede travel. Ed couldn't remember the last time he'd seen an orange plastic cone standing in the road. "—Got a fare at the Mayfield Florist if you want it."

"Copy that fare at the florist. That's over on Broadway, isn't it?"

Edrow pulled along the curb in front of the flower shop and waited. A few minutes passed. Then he saw her through his side mirror, running towards the car, a shock of red hair billowing behind her like a flame. She opened the door and scooted across the backseat.

"Thanks for waiting."

Edrow nodded. "Where to?"

"Murray State. Hester Hall."

"Okey dokey."

In the rear view mirror he saw a very pretty face, pale with freckles that ran from cheek to cheek and glassy green eyes. Her lips were thick, the color of watermelon flesh.

Edrow never talked to passengers. Ten years ago when he started driving for the company, after the discovery that his pension wouldn't make ends meet, customers often chatted him up but nowadays people seemed agitated most of the time. They talked less. Whenever he tried with small talk, his tip was small or he didn't get one at all. If a passenger asked him a question he was sure to answer but he made it a rule never to ask any of his own. He looked in the rearview mirror again, reading the white tank top with the words Girl Power stretched across ample breasts and broke his own rule.

"Two of my kids went to Murray State. What do you study?"

"I'm an Ag major."

"Hard classes?"

"My Plant Breeding class is easy but Principles of Animal Nutrition and Greenhouse Management—those are killers."

Edrow almost told the girl that his wife had a greenhouse, that he had

taken out a second mortgage to have the thing built with a fancy drip irrigation system just so Mina could grow tomatoes and sell them at the Farmers Market. The girl told him she was from Paris—Tennessee not France. A full scholarship brought her to Murray State. She belonged to a sorority, and worked at the Mayfield Florist on weekends. When they pulled into the parking lot of Hester Hall, she looked at the operator's license on the back of the driver's seat before reading the meter. She reached over the front seat with a five and three singles, a dollar over her fare.

"Thank you, Edrow."

He took the money, surprised that she called him by name. "My pleasure. What's your name?"

"Katie."

"Maybe I'll see you again, Katie."

She was already inside the dormitory before Edrow leaned his head out the window. "Good luck. Hasta luego!"

During the week Edrow shuttled people between Mayfield and its neighboring small towns, Carlisle, Hinkston, Pryorsburg and Wingo but on Saturdays most of the fares were in the city. He preferred small town customers to the ones from Mayfield because they allowed enough time for travel and helped you with directions if you needed them. City customers made him anxious with their hurry and worry. They expected him to know the shortest possible route to everywhere. On Sundays, he dropped Mina at the Farmer's Market in Pryorsburg then headed to Mayfield. En route, dispatch issued a request for pickup at 316 Broadway.

Katie waited on the corner in white shorts and a yellow tank top. She crawled into the cab with a cell phone to her ear, interrupting her call long enough to say, "Murray State. Hester Hall."

A few minutes passed and she flipped the phone shut.

"Hello, again," she said, smiling into the rearview mirror.

Edrow's hands felt rubbery. He loosened his grip on the steering wheel, reaching for a special greeting for the girl until his thoughts were disrupted by the first four bars of "White Christmas."

"Out-of season tunes are the best way to go in the dorm—it's the only way to tell yours apart," Katie explained. "Excuse me, I have to get this. My sorority—we're planning our end-of-year dance. It's sort of a big

deal.”

Her politeness pleased him. Edrow wondered if she knew Bing Crosby’s version.

Katie was still on the phone when they pulled into the lot of Hester Hall. She handed Edrow eight dollars, mouthed “Thank you” and left. He watched her run toward the dormitory, laughing when he noticed her dirty pink Converse All Stars. A perpetual bench-warmer in high school, he’d worn a blue pair just like them.

With time to kill before he picked up his wife, Edrow drove around fighting a craving for a Peanut Buster Parfait. He thanked Pravachol, the miracle cholesterol drug, as he headed for the nearest strip mall. On the short walk from the car to the Dairy Queen, he passed a T-Mobile store. Leaning against the store window, he made fences with his hands along the sides of his face and peered inside. Baffled by signage about long distance programs, roaming rates, and 300 minutes versus 600 whenever minutes, he was about to give up when his eyes landed on a small silver phone exactly like Katie’s.

A skinny boy with bushy eyebrows and a patch of acne below his mouth met Edrow at the door to discuss national plans and regional plans. Edrow explained that he only needed a phone “in case of an emergency.” The sales boy introduced the T-Mobile Hotspot featuring broadband wireless internet access. Edrow explained that he couldn’t send a message in a bottle let alone on a tiny phone. The sales boy, a mere fifty-dollars away from employee of the month, pressed on about picture and video messaging until finally Edrow looked at his watch.

Fifteen minutes later Edrow left the store with a free silver Nokia 3595 cell phone and the most whenever minutes for \$39.99 a month. Inside his car he pulled the phone from the box. The phone vibrated in his hand, startling him.

“Just making sure we activated your phone properly, Mr. Bodine. Don’t forget to set up your voice mail. Directions are in the box,” said the cheerful voice on the other end. Grateful that the old man had helped him meet his goal, the salesboy felt especially generous, “And if you have any trouble setting up that voice mail just come on back to see me. Have a good weekend.” Edrow thanked him. It took him several minutes to locate the off button and push it in with his large thumb. He put the phone into the glove compartment.

As usual, Mina sold more tomatoes than anyone else that Saturday. At the University of Kentucky one summer a charming young instructor had introduced her to perlite culture. Impressed with Mina’s enthusiasm, the teacher had pulled her aside to tell her about a new development at the West of Scotland Agriculture College. “Comparative trials over a number of seasons showed that tomato crops grown in the perlite system outyielded those grown in the rock-wool fertilizer” Mina used. “The trials also demonstrated that the perlite

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nutrient system markedly reduced bacterial populations, increasing tomato yield." Mina treasured this valuable knowledge given to her alone.

That evening Edrow made a beeline for the refrigerator while Mina went through the mail, stopping at a letter from Eve, their youngest, a student at the University of Wisconsin. Edrow poured two glasses of iced tea as Mina read the letter in silence.

"What's she up to?"

Annoyed that she had not heard from Eve in weeks, Mina said in her most judgmental tone, "She says school's going fine. It ought to be as much as it's costing. She wants more money. Says she's got to have a cell phone. Says it'll cost fifty dollars a month. Of course, it's our fault for not buying her one before she left."

Edrow wondered if Eve had gone to T-Mobile.

"You know Ed, she never writes unless she wants something. She's too chicken to ask for what she wants when she calls. Says that roommate of hers is always on the phone and she's missing important calls. Important calls my Aunt Jenny. What kind of important calls is a freshman getting?"

Edrow wondered if that was why Katie had a cell phone. Maybe her roommate was a big mouth too and Katie missed her important calls, calls about things like the sorority dance.

"Better just send her the money Mina."

"Well I'll be a sty on a pig's eye. Edrow Bodine did you suffer a little sun stroke today? Bad enough she's all the way up there in Wisconsin. Why she couldn't go to Murray State like the others I'll never know."

Edrow thought he knew. Katie had told him that she felt like her own woman in Kentucky, even though she was just over the state line from her native Tennessee. Maybe Eve wanted that same feeling.

"Just send her the money. What if you're trying to reach her and can't get through? You'll get yourself all worked up."

"I guess." Mina folded the letter and put it back in the envelope before adding it to the drawer that held all the letters from their children over the years. "There's left over broccoli salad and chicken from yesterday. If you want something else, we'll have to go out. I really need to go to the store."

Edrow didn't quite know why he suggested they go to the Sizzler on Route 97.

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Mina turned off the bedside lamp and made her body a spoon for Edrow, who remained on his back to stare at the ceiling. He took deep breaths to relax himself because Mina had seen in *Redbook* that deep breaths helped you fall asleep faster and for longer sleep cycles. It was an unlucky trade-off since he could fall asleep that way but the deep-breathing meant he had to inhale Mina's scent of Dove soap, Estee Lauder dusting powder, and underneath them, a hint of fertilizer. Each decade of their thirty-plus-year marriage the combination had changed: from Irish Spring and *White Shoulders* to Ivory and *Shalimar* and now to Dove and *Knowing*. That afternoon Katie had smelled like spring—sweat, the peel of clementines and the petals of Quaker Ladies. But mostly like sweat.

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Mina shook her head at the dust clouds rising from the spinning tires of Edrow's taxi. "Don't give it so much gas," she said to the empty foyer. When he finally pulled off, she returned to the sun porch to clear away the morning's dishes. She brushed breadcrumbs from both saucers onto the tablecloth, thinking of what else besides the dish towels she might add to make a full wash load, when a searing pain shot across her back. She grabbed the table, thinking of John Travolta riding the mechanical bull in Giley's Bar, a scene from her favorite movie, "Urban Cowboy." The pain turned into a slow-paced throbbing and then the phone rang.

"No, Franny, Dad doesn't know yet. Stop bugging me. It's not a big deal. Doctor says the whole thing will only take a couple of hours. They do them laparoscopic these days. Yes. I know he needs to know. I just haven't gotten around to telling him. He's acting funny these days. I don't know. Like he's depressed or something. He doesn't talk much when he comes home. He's been listening to that Patsy Cline CD you gave him for Christmas. He likes it a lot. Yes, I'll tell him. Now stop bugging me. How's the job?"

Mina stood in the middle of the kitchen floor undecided about what to do next. A period of quiet thought and melancholy seemed to follow each conversation with her children. Some of the magic Edrow missed in his life, Mina had found in marriage and motherhood. She never pined for a career. Sure, you could find satisfaction in a job—even earn accolades and awards but eventually you retired. You couldn't retire from family, a thought that comforted Mina. Middle age delivered no crisis as it had to some of the women she knew but it did leave her with a question—(She discovered that a house without children affords the time to ponder life's hardest questions)—What could she commit herself to now that motherhood required less hands-on work? Thumbing through *Better Homes and Gardens* one afternoon while waiting to see the dentist, she read an article on tomatoes. Tomatoes required a lot of labor and maintenance to grow properly. When the receptionist called her name, her mind was made up. She bought her first seeds later that day. She could not fail: labor and maintenance were a good wife and

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mother's specialty.

"The laundry," Mina thought aloud. Franny was wrong. Such a short surgery and probably outpatient at that, Edrow didn't need to know.

What Edrow needed to know included how the planning was going for Katie's sorority dance, so he asked her when she got into his taxi that afternoon wearing a white sun dress with pink polka dots and her dirty pink Converse All Stars. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail. He wondered if she ironed her hair like Mina had years ago. In the rearview mirror he stared at the girl's squared shoulders. He saw no collar bone though the dress was low cut. She had never been thin, he decided, and never would be. She looked healthy, the kind of girl that's not afraid to eat—not like his own daughters who turned his stomach last Christmas when they were home because they picked over the ham and mashed potatoes the way he picked over his oatmeal.

"To tell you the truth Eddie, I'll be glad when it's over," Katie said.

He had always wanted to be an Eddie.

"It's hard to work with a group of people," Edrow said, repeating what he had heard from Mina years ago when she joined the PTA, after taking to heart Barbara Eden's struggle in Harper Valley.

"You're right. And to top it all off, our president is leaving for summer vacation early. Her family's going on some big cruise. Since I'm the vice-president, everything's falling on my shoulders."

Edrow glanced at her shoulders. Better to look at her shoulders than her breasts because the air conditioning made her nipples pucker. "It'll work out fine. Your freckles are nice."

"What?"

"Your freckles. I like them. You wear them well."

Katie laughed. "Really? You want them?"

He pulled into Hester Hall and waited for her to hand him the money. Today he wouldn't accept it. She would lean her sweet face over the front seat and give him her usual "Thank You" peck on the cheek. And she would see it, baby's bottom pink with veins like vines circling up a Greek column. Edrow stammered out of his day dream when Katie tapped him on the shoulder with eight dollars.

"No no no. Not today, kiddo. It's on me."

"Oh, Eddie, I can't. Come on. Take it."

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“Nope.” He turned a ruddy, pocked face to her and looked her straight in the eyes. “Really, it’s on me.”

“Well, thank you Eddie. That’s really nice.” She gathered her belongings. “I was wondering if you would take me to the Horticulture Convention during the week. I don’t know the exact time but if you give me your number I’ll call you.”

Edrow imagined the questions Mina would ask if she answered Katie’s call, then tried to recall his cell phone number, a hopeless task since the phone had stayed in the glove compartment unused since its purchase.

“Better give me your number. I’ll call you.”

She wrote her number down on a sheet of notebook paper, folded it and handed it over the front seat. He liked the way she wrote her name: Katie with a smiley face instead of a dot over the i. He took out his cell phone. He knew that the sales boy had shown him how to store a number in the phone’s address book, now if he could remember how to do it.

“Eddie, you got a cell phone! Looks like we’ve got the same model. Call me,” she said again, kissing him on the cheek on her way out of the car. “Okey dokey. Hasta luego.”

A red sun hung above the road to Wingo that evening. Reaching to turn off the air conditioner, Edrow accidentally hit a button and Patsy’s voice filled the car. It was his lucky day. He rolled down the car window. May wind scented with oncoming rain tousled his gray and brown hair. He took one hand from the steering wheel and patted the cheek where Katie had kissed him. “I say Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining. Shine on the one that’s gone and left me blue,” he sang, coasting at seventy-eight miles per hour—eight above the speed limit.

Over Salisbury steak with peas and carrots Edrow wished he was brave enough to invite Katie to dine with them. He remembered Franny’s and Todd’s complaints about the cafeteria food at MSU. He was almost sure they would have perished were it not for the pot pies they kept in the mini-refrigerators he and Mina rented for them.

“Ed, are you feeling all right?” Mina asked. She would have told him the ultrasound showed several large gallstones but she didn’t like the way he looked.

“I feel okay.”

“Sure are quiet—not that you’ve ever been a chatterbox. Things going all right at work?”

“Everything’s fine.”

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That was the thing about men that annoyed her most. Her father had been the same way. If everything was fine with them, everything was fine—when actually everything was not fine. She rose from the table with her empty plate.

“There’s sugar-free cherry jello in the fridge for dessert. I’m going out to the greenhouse.”

“Okey dokey.”

Mina wondered what was harder, having them walk out the door and disappear or never leave the house and vanish all the same. Whatever was going on with her husband, it was much worse than what she was going through. Her worry was confirmed when Edrow came home the following evening with a bag from Harrison’s Shoe Store. His Rockports were worn and she was surprised that he hadn’t asked her to go with him to pick out new ones. Edrow hated to pay full price for anything and he hated even more negotiations with sales people. She was always able to finagle a sale price even on regular priced items.

Mina opened the shoe box absolutely certain a mistake had been made when she saw a pair of Converse All Stars in royal blue. Edrow snatched the box from her, pulled out a shoe, and sat down on the couch to lace it. This confirmed it. Wearing a canvas shoe with little or no support with his bad feet was downright foolish. Whatever self-destructive path you’re troding, Edrow Bodine, we will talk to Dr. Stevens about, Mina thought, making a mental note to call the marriage counselor they had seen some years before.

Edrow saw Katie through the glass doors before she exited the dormitory. Her hair was up and she had on glasses. He didn’t care much for the glasses, they made her look like a president’s wife but her hair pleased him. He opened his car door, standing and grinning like a kid who’s won the Easter Egg hunt, his blue-canvased feet side by side.

“You’ve got some fancy ’do, and I got new shoes.”

Katie looked down and laughed. “Cool beans, Eddie.”

“You like them?”

“Yeah Eddie, they’re great!”

Edrow thought he saw a wink. “Guess we better get you to the convention then.”

“Do I smell strawberries?” Katie asked, fastening her seat belt.

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“Why yes you do. I’m trying to eat healthy snacks. When you drive a taxi all day you wind up eating a lot of that fast food junk.”

“You mind if I have a few? I’m starving.”

“Not at all.” He handed her the green plastic basket of Safeway strawberries. “Go on and have the rest.”

He started the car, watching her lips graze each strawberry moments before her good teeth sank into them. Occasionally he heard a slurp. She coughed once and said the strawberries were juicy. At the last stoplight before the highway entrance, Edrow watched in the mirror as Katie sucked each of her long sticky fingers.

“Sorry I don’t have any napkins for you,” he stammered when their eyes met.

“Maybe this thing won’t be a total bust. Maybe I’ll line up a job for after graduation,” she said, as though continuing outloud a conversation in her head. “Maybe I’ll land my dream job at the FDA.”

At the convention hall, Katie clamped her fingers over the front seat and pulled herself forward. She rested her chin on top of the seat, turning a childlike face to Edrow. “Are you taking my money today?”

“Young lady, your money’s no good here.”

“Eddie, you spoil me. Guess I’ll just have to pay you with a sticky kiss.”

To celebrate the kiss that seemed longer than the others Edrow drove to Dairy Queen. Unfastening his seatbelt, his hand brushed against his slight erection. In the DQ, he headed for the bathroom. He stood at the urinal for what seemed like a long time sure of what he wanted to do but embarrassed by the thought of it. He closed his eyes, taking his penis into his hand. Images of Katie flew in and out of his mind like fireflies too quick to catch—big breasts in a tank top—shapely legs under a sundress. In the backseat of his cab she shook her hair loose, talked sweetly while stroking him with strawberry-stained fingers. When he finished, he washed his hands, went to the counter and ordered a Peanut Buster Parfait.

A post-it note stuck to the kitchen counter read: *Dinner—Fish sticks in freezer, salad in the fridge. Home late. Must be the day for the Tomato Growers Club meeting, Edrow thought. He read the microwave directions for the fish sticks but turned on the oven because he could never remember the exact sequence of button-pushing for working the damn thing. Then the phone rang. No one ever called for him so he let the answering machine get it. “Dad, this is Franny. I assume you’re at the hospital. Call me to let me—.” He grabbed the phone, listening as Franny screamed about Mina’s gall bladder surgery. He turned off the*

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oven and grabbed his keys just as a car pulled into the driveway.

A light went on inside the cab that pulled in front of their house. From the short distance he could make out Mina's silhouette. The driver got out and walked around to Mina's door. Edrow watched as he poured the cup of his hand around his wife's elbow to steady her. Edrow opened the door and fished around for money to pay the driver while Mina thanked him.

Hunched over on the side of the bed that evening, not a trace of anger was heard in his voice when Edrow said, "You should've told me. I don't know what it means that you didn't." He had sat through three brief long distance conversations between his wife and their children so he knew that the surgery had gone well and in several weeks she would be "hauling fertilizer bags again." He wished he was thoughtful like Mina. Before falling asleep she had squeezed his hand and said, "I'm no dummy, Edrow. I know something's going on with you. I didn't want to worry you. You've been so—so preoccupied lately. Besides, I knew it would be a simple procedure." Edrow turned on his side, "Franny's right, you know. There's always a risk with surgery." He looked out their bedroom window at the greenhouse and inhaled the night breeze hinting at rain not far off.

Mina moved a bit slower the following morning but oatmeal, whole wheat toast and coffee waited for Edrow all the same when he entered the sun room in polyester pants, a lemon yellow shirt and Converse All Stars.

"If you want me to stay home today, I will," he whispered.

"Eat your oatmeal."

His first stop that morning was the BP gas station. Besides a full tank, the cab needed a good vacuuming. He ran the nozzle over the seats, head rests and speakers in the back window. He put a hand under the driver's seat to make sure no lost items would be vacuumed and repeated this under the passenger seat where he found a little plastic card. He studied it for a long time even though he recognized the face instantly. Printed in Murray State purple, under the small head shot, was the name Katherine O'Donnell. He turned the card over and read: *This card is the property of Murray State University. Use of this card is governed by the University's rules and regulations. This card is nontransferable and must be presented to University officials upon request.*

Between customers that day, Edrow removed the ID from his wallet. In the back parking lot of Wendy's, during his lunch break, the sweaty fingers of his left hand clutched the ID as he tugged at the weight in his crotch with his right. He came in the gold foil wrapping of the Big Bacon Classic he had devoured just as it started to rain.

On the road to Wingo he passed a sign welcoming travelers to

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Pryorsburg when the Ford Taurus sputtered to a halt. He tried to start the car two or three times, before Mina's voice came to him, "You'll flood it that way." In the side mirror he saw the headlights of cars that rocked him as they sped by. Lightning cracked the sky. The nearest gas station was how far? Then he remembered his cell phone. He dialed triple A but no one answered. He pulled from his wallet the folded sheet of notebook paper. Just looking at her name with the smiley face made him smile. Katie answered on the first ring.

"Hi, Eddie."

"You got ESP or something? How'd you know it was me?"

"Caller ID."

He wasn't sure why he'd called her, she didn't have a car but he was sure glad he had.

"Are you out in this storm, Eddie?"

"Yeah."

"We are too."

"My car died."

"Your car died? Where are you?"

"I'm on 45. About a hundred yards from the Pryorsburg exit."

"Poor Eddie. We were heading to the mall but we'll come and get you. Leave your phone on."

In no time at all Katie's wet face was outside his window. She tapped against the glass and he saw a strip of white so he knew she was grinning at him. When he got of the car she put her hand against his back, pushing him under her umbrella. Giggling and jogging in place as rain pelted her back, she pushed Edrow to the back door of a red Chevy Blazer. Inside the car she flipped down the mirror over the passenger's seat. Paying no mind to the large young man in the seat next to her, Edrow watched as she pushed back her wet hair.

"Eddie, this is my boyfriend, Nate. Nate, this is Eddie."

Nate's head grazed the roof of the SUV so he lowered it a little to look in the rearview mirror at Edrow, flashing a perfect set of teeth.

"You're the guy that gives Katie free rides. Nice to meet you. I'd take her around if I could but I work plus I'm on the basketball team. We practice a lot."

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“He’s the center,” Katie said, rubbing his thigh. “But even centers have to wear ties to their girlfriend’s dance. We were headed to the mall to pick one out when you called.”

“I don’t know about you Eddie but I can list a million and one other things I’d rather do besides go to a dumb sorority dance.”

Katie gave Nate a play punch on the arm.

“—Not that I won’t go and have a great time.”

Edrow recalled this feeling from boyhood in Paducah, riding around in the car with his parents to whom he always had so little to say.

“You like driving a taxi, Eddie?” Nate asked.

She had never mentioned a boyfriend. He was sure of it. They had talked about everything, her school work, her roommate, her sorority, her family.

“Earth to Eddie.” Katie said, her head between the two seats looking back at him. “Where are you, Eddie?”

“He’s probably thinking about his car. My Dad says that Ford never worked all the bugs out of the Taurus.” Nate rummaged through a stack of CDs. He used his right knee to steady the steering wheel and took a CD out of the case and put it in the stereo. Edrow was impressed. Nate lifted his right hand and started pointing to the air, like the preacher at Little Obion Baptist Church during the high points of his sermon. Edrow cocked his head and listened to what Nate and the stereo said.

“No one’s iller than me. What? No one, no one is iller than me. No one is iller than me. It’s Mr. Swifty from the 3-1-3.”

Katie turned around. “313 is his area code. It’s Eminem. He’s from Detroit.”

Edrow said M and Ms were one of his favorite candies but Katie didn’t hear him because Nate turned up the volume. The bass in the backseat speakers made Edrow’s back throb as he watched the two heads in front nod to the music.

“I make rappers wanna turn into singers. I keep hoes licking they fingers. Bring this competition and face this meanin. Got your whole crew doing subpeonas. Hell no you ain’t seen a crew genius. Murder whoever’s between us.” Edrow listened to Nate but could not make heads nor tails of the candyman’s song.

They pulled into his driveway and Katie said that he lived in a sweet

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house. He thanked them for the lift.

“See you around, Eddie,” he heard her say through the closed window.

“Hasta luego.”

He watched them speed off, certain of what was to come after their trip to the mall. For most of the trip, Katie’s hand had squeezed Nate’s thigh.

Mina sat on the blue and white plaid sofa, a yellow pillow tucked behind the small of her back. She laid the newspaper across her lap when her husband entered the living room.

“I’m glad you’re home,” she said, truthfully. “It’s nasty out.”

“The car died on me.”

“Again? That’s the third or fourth time. Harry always buys the worst fleet.”

“I know.”

“Go get out of those wet clothes.”

“Wet shoes, too.”

On his return, they met in the hallway. Edrow followed Mina into the kitchen where she opened the refrigerator and pulled out a pyrex dish.

“Turkey meat loaf.”

“My favorite.”

She swatted a hand at his sarcasm then replaced the foil with a plastic lid and put it in the microwave. Whistling Ed’s favorite song, she reached in the cabinet for dinner plates while he took silverware from the drawer, talk-singing in a better than average baritone: “Blue moon of Kentucky keep on shining. Shine on the one that’s gone and left me bluuue.”

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**LaShonda Katrice Barnett's** award-winning short fiction appears in a story collection (Callaloo, 1999) and *Guernica*, The Chicago Tribune's *Printers Row*, the *New Orleans Review*, *Juked*, and numerous other literary journals. Her debut novel, *Jam! On The Vine* will be published Grove/Atlantic (Feb. 2015). She lives in Manhattan. She is also the editor of three published or forthcoming interview books with women musicians: *I Got Thunder: Black Women Songwriters On Their Craft* (2007); *Off The Record: Conversations with African American and Brazilian Women Musicians* (2014); and *Drop The Mic: Women Hip Hop & Neo Soul Artists On Creative Process &*

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