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WHAT DO WE DO? BY DANNY McHOEY JR. COPYRIGHT 2007

In the mist of all this whiteness his hands betray him. White stoic faces, with flat eyes—blue, brown, green— stand behind a sterile blue desk with twisted lips, staring, while he sits on the bolted gray bench, looking at his large brown hands.

His hands shake even as he tells them to stop. He folds them behind his head trying to look calm, but it doesn't work. He thinks of Clarice, his wife, her cancer weary body. The boney arms and sunken face, dark- circled eyes staring at him as he picked up the phone. Earlier he told her that the call had been someone who had seen Zahid that they could tell him where he was. He told her that he was going to look for him, that he would be back, for her to stay in the bed, tucked up under her covers. As he put on his hat he heard the phlegm in her voice as she sang:

Nearer my God to Thee

Near to thee

E'ar though it be a cross

That raiseth me

Still all my song shall be

Nearer my God to thee

Nearer to thee

Now the white cop, in a blue uniform with shiny gold buttons, comes closer and pats him on the back. They are sitting adjacent to the silver doors that made his hands shake when he first saw them. He thinks that the doors are cold to the touch. He takes his hands from behind his head and stands up. Then sits down again. He doesn't have the courage to move forward and so he just sits there shaking his head and looking at his large brown hands. The sight of the smooth flesh frightens him even more. When was the last time that he had touched his boy? The last time that he wiped away Clarice's tears?

"Mr. Asudo?" The cop says as he places the tips of his hands on his shoulders. "I know this is difficult... but we need for you to ID the body."

"Okay." Midnight Asudo stands up and walks towards the silver doors. As they

move he feels the flat eyes on his back and he pushes his hands in his pockets. They go in and walk down an aisle surrounded with large silver containers. He tries hard to focus on his shaking hands but all he can think of is the fight that he and Zahid had the other day. He only told him that he couldn't be grown and live in his house. That he couldn't just sit around and not work. That he couldn't walk around like his shit didn't stink. But he didn't tell him to get himself killed.

The cop stops abruptly and Midnight bumps into the back of him. Embarrassed, he mumbles "Sorry" and looks at the floor. The cop sighs and pulls back a white sheet covering a body. When Midnight sees Zahid's face his legs buckle under him. The cop holds him by his elbow and walks him back out the silver doors.

"Are you okayay, Mr. Asudo?"

"What happened? What happened to him?" Midnight slides onto the bench, his shoulders slump.

"They found him behind the Pick-N- Pay about 5:00 am this morning."

"How did he die?"

"Well..." the cop shakes his head slowly. "He was shot, Mr. Asudo."

Midnight looks back at the door and without looking at the cop he says, "Can you call Majestic Funeral Home and ask them to pick him up?"

A few hours later while sitting in his car he thinks of Clarice again. He knows that she is lying in bed—in their red brick house on Talver Avenue, its lawn full of red, green, and orange leaves, an oak tree towering over their bedroom window—sickly, tired, worn out from the years of their struggle with the cancer and with nothing to do with her fingers. Once she was a seamstress—known for the way she held her needle, the intricate stitch that held hems, the ease in healing ripped pants, delicate beading on wedding dresses...

He remembers that she was once very beautiful: full lips, almond shaped eyes, long black hair, and lemony skin. Midnight had been attracted to her, then, but as she got older and sicker, he turned away from her. Now all they did was argue over how to save a seventeen year old who thought he was a man. That night after Midnight kicked him out the house, three days ago, Clarice came down the stairs in a cotton robe opened at the middle. He could see her dingy slip and the skinny legs that used to be shapely. He turned his head at the sight and waited for her.

"What are you yelling at him about? You know he's a boy. He doesn't know better." She reached the bottom of the steps and began coughing.

"Clarice, go back upstairs."

"What did he do to you?"

Midnight watched her from the step and wanted her to cover herself up. "He don't act like he a boy, Clarice, and you know it."

"Well, he is, and talking to him that way won't make it better. You will make him hate you."

"He can't be a grown man when he don't clean up after himself. And he can't come in here at anytime of night. This is not a hotel."

"A hotel? You know he doesn't mean any harm. He just wants to have fun. That's

all. Why can't you do that? Why can't you let him have his fun?"

"You need to stop spoiling him Clarice. That's his problem. You have spoiled him since day one."

"He's my child," she coughed loudly and walked down the stairs into the front room. On her hair was an old Brown Sugar stocking. Her feet are bare.

"You need to go back up those stairs and get under some cover."

"Where did he go? Did he say?"

He walked over to her and untied and retied the robe, covering up her legs. "I don't know. I didn't ask."

"So just like that you put him out? Our son? Where is he going to go?"

"I don't know Clarice. I don't know."

II

"He used to need me once. When he was a kid. A boy. A ginger-colored boy with wide eyes and a head full of curly hair. You know how boys love their fathers? How they walk around and do everything that you do? Well, he used to do that. Used to watch me shave in the mornings: holding my leg, staring at me with those wide eyes. He would come down the stairs with my uniform shirt on telling me he was going to deliver mail. He would sit in the front room right up under me, watching the Cavaliers, yelling at the T.V. just like I did. He loved me and I felt it. I knew he loved me and I ate it up. Back then I was everything to him. I used to go to the Lowdown and play pool on Mondays after work with the fellas. I would come home after ten and he would be right there on the couch waiting on me. Waiting on me. I used to grin like a Cheshire cat with my chest out proud that my boy waited for me. I was real proud back then. I loved him because that's all I wanted to do. My daddy wasn't there when I was a kid and I felt left out a lot when I was growing up so I told myself that I wouldn't do the same. If I had a son I wouldn't make him feel left out. Always make him feel wanted.

And I did just that. I would ride him hobby-horse on my knees, his body flying like a rag-doll, laughing like I was tickling his insides. He used to hold on like I was really going to let him go. He would scream through laughter and tears saying "Let him down," and when I stopped he wanted me to do it all over again. Those moments were good for me.

Any extra money that I had left after I paid the bills I spent on him. If we were in Downtown Clearview and he saw something in the window, and asked for it, it was almost as good as his. Even if I had to save for it. I would and did. I remember the time he wanted one of those Schwinn bicycles—a red one with silver handlebars that he saw in the Plain Dealer— he cried and asked for it. I got it and we spent a whole Saturday putting it together. A whole day for a bike that he didn't even know how to ride. But it didn't matter. I wanted him to feel like he meant something to me even though I didn't feel it from my own daddy.

I tried hard to be strong for him too. I didn't want him to feel the type of pain I used to feel as a kid laying in bed with my big brother, Juney, asking him if Daddy loved us. If he was coming back? If he knew that we were waiting for him to come home? Juney didn't know and I didn't know and my momma didn't know even though she tried her best to convince us that he was. She would sit at our kitchen table, ladling Pinto Beans into our bowls, telling us that he was coming back; that he was just away for a little while, not long, that he wouldn't be long. That he couldn't let himself forget about us because we were important to him. But I didn't

believe it. Neither did Juney. And we wondered how she could?

But my boy Zahid, one day when he was six, came to me in tears. I thought someone had hurt him. And I jumped up ready to kill someone. I grabbed him by his shoulders and asked him what was wrong. Through all the tears I heard him say that Teaser, our dog, was dead. He wanted to know what happened to him. He wanted to know why anyone would kill his dog. I looked in his eyes and saw a pain that I was trying to keep him from ever feeling. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to say and I couldn't look back into the wide eyes because they were filled with something I had been running from all my life. Something that I felt every time I sat at that table, playing in those beans, feeling and knowing that my father wasn't ever coming back. The pain of those days coming back again as I watched Zahid. I just held him and told him that it would be okayay.

That entire week after Teaser died he sat out back. I would sit back there with him and no matter what I did he wouldn't leave. He would fall asleep back there waiting for Teaser to come back. How could I explain to him that the dog was gone forever? How could I tell him that the thing he loved more than himself at times was lost to him forever? I couldn't tell him. I didn't know how. I couldn't even explain it to myself—could not convince myself that no matter how many things I made up about my daddy coming back after work to play catch with me and Juney; or run around our yard with us playing, “it” screaming until the back of our throats were sore. He wasn't coming back. I would go out there and look into Zahid's little face, his eyes sad like my eyes used to be sad, longing for the same thing that I longed for and there was nothing that I could do. There was no answer that I could give because I didn't have one; I couldn't work through my own confusion so how could I help him through his?

It felt like after that that things started to change. I felt like he stopped believing in me, stopped needing me. I can't say for sure but I do know that he changed and he turned from me.

After that night, when I would come home late from the Lowdown, he would be in his bed. Not sleeping on the couch. Not waiting. I used to think that maybe he was just too tired. Over time he stopped watching the games with me and stopped coming around me as much. When he was older I would rub his head and he would snatch away from me like I had a disease or something and say, “I'm not a kid anymore,” in a voice that I didn't recognize: one that had changed without me knowing it. It was then that I really looked at him. The little boy with the wide eyes and curly hair sat at my table with a Caesar cut and was lean. He was someone that I no longer knew and it hurt. It hurt me that he didn't need me or seem to need me anymore. It got to the point where I stopped even looking for him when I came home. I would go straight to the front room. Not caring if he was home or not. I didn't want to get my feelings hurt.

One day, when he was thirteen, I walked into the house and saw him in the kitchen with his mother. She was standing at the sink holding her hands under running water. She was looking at him and telling him something and he sat there glued to everything she said. He looked at her the way he used to look at me. Right then I got this feeling in the pit of my stomach, an uneasy feeling like I was falling under water and somebody's foot was holding me there, and my lungs were filling with water that I couldn't get rid of, and it spread through my body, it was swallowing me and at the same time taking me under, and I hated her for that. I hated her for being outside of the water, for being able to swim while I was drowning. She was taking my place and I felt that left- out feeling again. Felt that pain that glued my body to a chair and my hands to a spoon that I couldn't raise to my mouth. Lost in the water. Lost without him. Afraid to let him go because I needed him more than he needed me.

I didn't know how to act. The more he turned from me the more I turned from her. The more he stopped talking to me the less I had to say to her. When they found

the cancer I sat there while she cried. I kept my hands at my side and I felt silly. I felt really silly about hating the mother of my child because she was doing what a woman is supposed to do. Love her child.

I needed to feel like he needed me still. I figured since his mother was sick that he would need me. But it didn't work out that way. He got even more distant and the only way that he talked to me was when I was yelling at him. If he left a glass on the table I screamed at him; if the milk carton was empty he was to blame; if there were clothes left in the bathroom I made him sweep the whole house; when he came in after curfew I took away the phone. I tried to find ways for him to even say anything to me and most times, when I yelled at him, he yelled back.

I picked at him and she picked at me. I yelled at him and she would scream at me. Then she started to get weaker and needing me more and I wasn't always there for her. But no matter how weak she was she still fought for him and I hated it even more that she was sick and still they were a team, an item. In my mind they sat in trees looking down at me while I was trying to figure out how to get back in."

III

Now he is driving along Superior Avenue. He passes Clearview Public Library and sees little kids in bright hooded jackets—some with fur around their hoods, some without—on the front lawn. Black and tan dogs run around the edges of the grass, barking, threatening attack. Midnight watches them out of his rearview mirror as he drives. He can't go home yet. Not yet. And even if he did what would he say? How could he tell her? He drives until Superior intersects with Eddy Road and he smells the fish without seeing the Fishboat. It is across from Ebenezer Baptist Church and the homes surrounding it are one story walk-ups and they have no yards.

He reaches Eddy Road and turns left. The Lowdown Bar is at the end of the narrow street and once he gets there he parks his car in a slanted parking space. It is 7:00pm and the lot is crowded. Walking towards the door he sees his reflection in the window: his once bright skin is now filmed over and the hair at his temples is thin. His face looks older than his 40 years. He takes off his cap and wipes lint out of his hair before going in.

Inside bodies lean over dusty pool tables while fingers dipped in chalk handle pool sticks like surgical tools. Balls like oversized marbles hit each other: Click- Clack, Click- Clack, Click- Clack! Long-legged women in skin-tight mini- skirts and painted on faces arch their backs, like calico cats, on the juke- box; Pall Mall's, Virginia Slim's, and Winston's dangle from their lips.

In the background a voice sings the blues while black bodies sway like shadows—the words of the song becoming their own— Love gone wrong. Heart ready to explode. Man got you down. Woman ran away. Paycheck a long time away.

When Midnight walks in he sees Ollie bent over a glass. His jet black curly hair makes him stand out. He is wearing the same thing that he had on the other day: a red blazer with one pocket instead of two, a pair of blue jeans that have a hole in the right knee, and a white shirt with dirt spots on the cuffs. Midnight walks over to the bar and sits on the stool next to Ollie. He rests his hands on the counter. It is sticky.

"Still running from trees?"

Ollie looks up at Midnight, picks up the glass, drinks and swallows loudly. "I've been calling you all day. Where you been?"

“Had to run some errands. Needed to get out of the house.”

Ollie looks him up and down. “Talk to Clarice, though. She didn’t sound too good. And she was acting crazy saying you kicked Zahid out.”

“She always worried about that boy.” Midnight studies his hands and thinks of his boy wrapped up in the white sheet the way it contrasted against his dark skin. The way it made it seem formal, real. “I told him to leave if he was too grown for his britches.”

“What he do?”

Midnight calls Larry the bartender over. Larry is the owner’s son. He is a bear of a man with his sleeves rolled up to his massive elbows. He still wears an afro and his eyebrows are as puffy as his hair.

“What you having, Night?” He asks taking a rag that was slung over his back and wiping at the bar top.

“Let me have a Jack on the rocks.”

“On the rocks?” Larry’s puffy eyebrow lifts and he shakes his head at Midnight before picking up a glass. “Long day?”

Midnight lowers his head and then turns back to Ollie.

“Well, why you kick him out?”

Larry sits the glass in front of Midnight and walks away. Animated, he turns to Ollie and says: “I came home from work and he was sitting there. Just sitting there.”

“Okay... that’s it?”

“Yeah, man. Sitting there and then I walked into the kitchen and there was a bowl full of dirty milk on the table with little cereal flakes floating in it and the sink full of dishes.” He pauses then looks back at his hands. “I lit into him, man. I’m at work all day to take care of him and he can’t even clean up after himself. Can’t even put a bowl in the sink?” Midnight reaches for a peanut, shells it, and tosses it into his mouth. “He didn’t even say hello, Ollie, not a word. And when I was yelling at him he just stood up and walked away. While he was ignoring me I told him to get out.”

“Over a bowl? You put him out over a bowl?” Ollie leans his head back and laughs. “You are a strange man, my friend. A strange man.”

“He didn’t even speak. Not a word, you know.”

“Where he go?”

“Don’t know man. You know, I would kill to know that my daddy even cared enough about me to fuss at me. That’s all it was Ollie. I was fussing because I care about him.”

“Did you tell him that?” Ollie looks at Larry leaning back against the ice cooler and asks for two more rounds.

Larry sits the glasses of dark liquor in front of them and Midnight looks at him and points to him. “Larry, listen. If you came home everyday from work and your house was a mess? A mess? And.... And nothing was done...and how would you feel if

your boy didn't speak to you? Didn't part his lips to say a word?"

"I can't call it, Night. I can't call it." Larry walks towards another customer tossing the dirty rag across his shoulders.

Midnight watches Larry then turns back to Ollie, "what do we do when we can't do nothing at all?"

"You got to tell him Night. It ain't enough to show 'em. You got to open up your mouth and tell 'em."

Midnight swallows the Jack and looks at Ollie. He pats his friend on the back. "Get home soon." He gets up from the bar stool and walks back to his car.

IV

"How can I tell her? How will I find the words to tell her? How can I say that I was jealous of the little boy that changed into a man that I didn't see? How can I tell her I died the moment I saw her hands under the running water with his eyes glued to her mouth? How can I tell her that I didn't want to touch her because I knew that she had touched him and stroked his head, leaned over his shoulder as he sat at the kitchen table and rubbed his face? She loved him up-close because she could. Because he let her.

She's already too weak. Refusing to stay up under the covers, buried. She refuses and the doctors don't give her much time to live. I don't want to hear the phlegm in her voice while she says, "What's wrong with him? He's okay, right, Midnight" The fingers like chopsticks holding onto the banister as she stumbles down the stairs, up from under the covers. Her body smelling like Vicks Vapor Rub, the Brown Sugar stocking on her head, her feet bare. Always bare even though she complains that the floor is too cold and even though I yell at her when she complains. She walks around with bare feet singing hymns in that voice that makes me think of sorrow and deep sadness. And weary people who live only for other people and not for themselves. I can't bear it today; can't handle the heavy coughing, the pale skinny legs, and the bones jutting out of her robe. I can't do it. I don't know how to tell her that he's dead.

I see her, always see her, sitting, waiting on me and I don't want to see her. Don't want her to know that I used to watch him sitting by her side, early in the mornings, rubbing her hands that used to be strong and agile. I used to see him tucking her under quilts she made. I see him even when he isn't there. But I can't tell her about that boy who rubbed her aching, idle hands, who loved her, who listened to her scratchy throat sing death songs. Songs of redemptions; songs of forgiveness; songs that I heard him singing when she fell asleep buried deep under the quilts that her hands made.

I can't tell her. Not yet. Not without feeling like I let him down like my daddy did me. Like he did every time I went to sleep and prayed real hard that he would walk up the stairs with a big smile on his face.

I can't tell her that the boy that I put out, the boy that was just a boy, a boy wanting to play stick ball in the street, the boy who wanted to run behind fast girls, the boy who rolled up the sleeves on his lean, ginger-colored arms, to pitch the ball, wait for the stick to connect with the ball, connect with him so that when he caught it, he was charged; the boy who hung out on corners trying to impress anyone who walked by with his new deep voice—the one that changed without him even knowing it—and silly new dances he learned in the school yard after school instead of coming straight home like I told him too; the boy who was beyond my reach, that boy, that boy who sat, mesmerized by lemony hands under running water, that boy free to make his own decisions, make up his own mind about who

he wanted to sit up under; who he wanted to give his love too, wanted to smile at, talk too; that boy who I loved, who she loved, with the wide eyes, still face, was dead. Dead on a table and covered with a white sheet. Stuck behind silver doors, silver doors, and dead.

V.

Sitting outside of his house Midnight turns the car off. He has been gone since the phone call early this morning. He sits. He looks up and sees the light from his bedroom window slicing through the branches of the trees. She is up. Waiting. In her robe. Not tucked under the covers. He takes his finger and traces the steering wheel then rubs his hand up and down the dash. He knows she is waiting and as soon as he comes in, as soon as the key clicks and the lock turns, she will be at the top of the stairs. Hair under a stocking, bare feet, always bare, waiting on him to tell her something.

He grabs the keys from the ignition and gets out of the car. He walks up his walkway and sees Ollie's wife, Cecilia, sitting on her porch. He waves and goes into the door. He is startled when he sees her. She is standing in the doorway.

“What took so long?”

“Can you let me get in the door good before you go jumpin on me?” He takes the key out of the door and closes it. He walks past her into the front room. She follows him.

“Did you find him?”

“What you doing out of bed, Clarice? Didn't I tell you to stay under the cover?”

“I can't sit up there not knowing about him Midnight. And you know it.”

“Why is it so cold in here? Why didn't you turn on the heat?”

“I ain't cold.” Clarice coughs and her body rattles like a tambourine—the cancer like beans thrown against the tight skin. “Where is he Midnight?”

“I'm cold and I need heat.” Midnight walks over to the thermostat and listens as it clicks on.

“Did the person see him?” Her voice gets louder and she walks over to him and grabs his arm. “Was he where they said he was?”

Midnight looks at the chopstick fingers, the dark splotches on her hands, and the eyes that look as if they are floating, and knows that she can't handle it. Knows that this one last thing would kill her for sure. He grabs her hand and kisses it. He then holds it in his and tells her, “No. They didn't see him. I will look for again in the morning. In the morning.”

