NAT BURNS

Nether Regions

Some wounds only love can heal
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Summer in Redstar, Alabama, usually settled in for a long, unwelcome stay. The people of the town regarded summer as an intruding mother-in-law dragging suitcases packed with heat and suffocating humidity. And though the sin of rudeness was employed by mid-July, there was no relief until her departure in mid-October.

Delora November was already harboring her own rude thoughts about the weather, even though by early May it had yet to sear the tiny leaves of the willow tree into brown ash. The thought of another long, humid summer of work and more work was almost more than she could tolerate. She wished she could leave, could shake the dust of this town off her discount store-brand athletic shoes. And she would, really, if only Louie would let go of her life.

The thought of Louie made nausea steal over her and she moved quickly from the back door into the relative gloom of Blossom’s Diner. Ancient Johnny Pellen was telling the story about the black bear again and the comforting cadence of it soothed Delora’s roiling stomach. She fetched herself a short glass of unsweetened iced tea from the urn and downed it fast, no sugar.

“Well, it weighed in at might near six hundred pounds and they say bears in that part of ’Bama never get that big,” Johnny summed up.
The tourist who was listening to Johnny ramble merely shook the *USA Today* he was perusing and made polite noises of interest.

Delora wiped an already gleaming counter and let her eyes roam the diner. The Jacksons were still okay over in the smoking section. Marina had given them the bill and they were lingering over a meal-ending cigarette. They were regulars and would let Marina or Delora know if they needed anything else.

She was most concerned about the family of five that was occupying booth eight. The booth abutted one of the huge panes of glass that made up the front wall and she was worried about young Jimmy’s airplane. It was a giant plastic jet airliner, and she was just waiting for one of the wings to take out the window. Jimmy was piloting in earnest too, even climbing onto the seat next to his bedraggled mother and banking the jet over her head and the head of his little sister as well.

The father, a quiet older man, was trying to study the menu while dealing with Jimmy’s younger brother who was about eighteen months old and experiencing everything on the table. The father would read one sentence of the menu, grab little brother’s hand, pry something from his clenched fingertips, then intone, “Jimmy, son, will you please sit down!” before returning to try the menu again.

“Want me to get them?” Marina asked, coming up close behind her.

“No, I already got them coffee. My table, I'll do it.”

Concern sparked in Marina’s dark eyes. “You don’t look so good. Are you sick today?” Her accent was a pleasant blend of America and her native Mexico.

Delora took a minute to admire Marina’s inky black hair and finely defined features. “Nope, I went outside for a minute and the heat got to me. I’m fine.”

She fetched the tattered order book from her pocket, checked to make sure she had a pen, then moved with expert grace across the floor.

“So, have y’all had a chance to decide?” she asked, reaching to right the saltshaker the baby had tumbled. She absently tossed some of the spilled salt over her left shoulder and caught Jimmy’s eye, giving him such a look that he parked the airliner and sat next to his sister, pretending to peer at the menu.

“I’ll have two Bright-Eyes for the kids, with milk, and I’ll have the Hearty Breakfast platter.” The mother had probably been up since dawn. Traveling with a family this young couldn’t be easy.
“And the baby?” She made a face at the toddler and he giggled and squirmed on his father’s lap.

“The baby can just eat off my plate, if that’s okay?”

“Sure. And you, sir?”

“I think I’ll have the Hearty as well, but can I have sausage instead of the bacon?”

“Absolutely,” Delora said as she gathered up the menus. “You’ll like our sausage. It’s local and fresh ground. Good and spicy.”

Interpreting her comment as interest, the man transformed before her eyes, changing from a tired, beaten-down father into the young rapscallion he must have been before settling down and raising a trio of children.

“I do like it spicy. Just how spicy is this local grind?” he asked, his voice light and flirtatious.

Delora sighed. There was something too compelling about conquering new territory for most men. She had no doubt that Mr. Tired Face would step out on Mrs. Tired Face the first real opportunity offered him. She glanced at Mrs. Tired Face and saw her shuttered disgust at her husband’s behavior. The kids all sensed the change in Daddy as well, for they had stilled to watch the exchange.

“Not too spicy, don’t worry,” she said as she left the table.

She tore off the middle copy of their order and placed it on the carousel for Tommy Jay, then started a run of fresh coffee. The Jacksons left, still talking animatedly, and Delora wondered how their marriage had lasted so long. Maybe it was because they had so much in common. Tyrone Jackson was a professor at the University of South Alabama over in Fairhope, and his wife, Sharell, was a librarian. It seemed they always had something interesting to talk about.

The fragrance of newly brewed coffee washed across her and she felt strangely at peace. Her marriage to Louie was over, in fact, if not in the Alabama legal system, and she felt good not having to analyze why it wasn’t working anymore.

“It’s done, honey,” Marina said as she slid by carrying a new order of eggs for Johnny.

Surprised, Delora looked down and realized she’d stood idle while the whole carafe of coffee filled. She glanced to the kitchen access and saw the steaming plates awaiting her. Lifting the coffeepot, she hurried back to the Tired Face parents and refilled their cups, assuring them that their food would be right out. Her left hand deposited more plastic containers of creamer even as she hurried away. With speed born from years of practice, she filled small glasses with milk from
the cooler and, with the glasses balanced in one hand and the two children’s pancakes and sausage links in the other, raced them back to the booth. One more trip and she had the parents served and made sure they were settled with plenty of ketchup and warm syrup.

As she turned to return to the kitchen she heard a loud expletive and whirled to find that young Jimmy’s jet airliner, in the hands of his sister, had veered and dumped milk across the table. Since the father was trying to rise to help the mother mop up the table, Delora automatically leaned to take the baby even as she murmured assurances that there was no harm done. The baby watched his parents clean up the milk, his hands sticky and clasped around a mottled mess of pancake. He continued to chew as Delora leaned with her free hand to pile the milk-soaked napkins into an empty coffee cup.

“It’s okay,” she assured the apologetic parents. “Accidents happen. Don’t worry yourself about it.”

The young girl huddled, as if ashamed, against the pocked vinyl of the booth seat. “It’s all right, honey,” Delora said directly to her. “We know you didn’t mean to do it.”

Delora shifted the baby against her hip and smiled when he presented a gap-toothed, pancake-filled grin. “You’re a cutie, aren’t you?” she teased, poking a finger into the baby’s round tummy.

“Oh, here, I’ll take him,” the mother said, brushing her disarrayed hair from her forehead. “You’re good with kids. How many do you have?”

Delora stiffened and quickly returned the child to his mother. “None. Nope. Just helped my mom with foster kids is all,” she explained as she removed the overflowing coffee cup and emptied milk glass. “I’ll get you a new cup of coffee.”

Feeling their curious stares heating her back, Delora faced the concerned eyes of Marina in front of her. It was too much. She dumped the dishes into the cavernous kitchen sinks, waved apologetically to Marina and went out the back door still wearing her apron. She just needed a minute—just a minute or two—alone. With dismay she saw Hinchey Barlowe getting out of his pickup.

“Hey, hold up, slick.” Hinchey caught up with Delora as she stepped into the late morning sunlight. “What’s the matter?”

Delora wasn’t crying, would not cry no matter what, but she was shook hard by what the woman had asked her. She was good with children, by golly, always had been, but now all that was over with. It was a fact best not thought about too much.

“Nothing. Nothing to worry about. How are you, Hinchey?”
Hinchey’s pink face pinched with worry as he studied her. Delora knew how much Hinchey cared for her, and pangs of guilt nagged at her every time they were together. He was always a comfort, however, and she considered him a dear friend. His face relaxed and he took a deep breath before speaking.

“Okay. I’m okay, but there must have been something going on for you to have come out that way. What happened?”

“Nothing really. This family in there just got to be too much for me.”

She chewed a thumbnail, her eyes looking along the long slope of I-65 leading out of town. “I just needed a minute.”

He watched her a long while, until Delora started worrying about him noting the shadows beneath her eyes and her disgracefully chewed nails.

“I sure do worry about you sometimes, Delora.”

She smiled and raised her eyes to look at him. “I worry about me too, Hinchey. I do. Seems like the good Lord has a whole different plan for me than what I had set aside for myself.”

“How do you mean?” He cocked his head to one side.

“I mean,” she straightened her apron and smoothed her hair, “I got a living to earn. Come on in and I’ll get you some breakfast. Do you know what you want?”

He grinned, his gaze going all befuddled. “Yeah, but I’m not so sure the state of Alabama would look kindly on me having my way with a married woman.”

Delora laughed hollowly, envisioning Mr. Tired Face in her mind, and moved through the door he held open for her. “How you do go on, Hinchey Barlowe.”

She fetched more milk, poured a new cup of coffee for Mrs. Tired Face and motioned for Hinchey to sit at the counter. The Tired Face Family was just as she left them—as if she’d never left their side.
Sometimes at night, especially on dark nights unlit by the light of the moon and stars, Sophie swore the bayou gave off its own glow from deep within the watery depths. The bayou was a living creature, breathing with each inhalation and exhalation of the tide, and the glow, like bright eyes, seemed to follow this tide. Perhaps the bayou was female, for it was brightest once a month, just after the new moon.

Sophie, watching the water from a slatted rocking chair on the porch, rocked and lazily wondered if the swamp water was like a rechargeable battery, storing so much moon and sun energy over time that it glowed when there was no other light source.

She pushed a bundle of thick blond curls from her cheek and studied the emanated light. Perhaps there was a whole world down there with its own photoelectric infrastructure. A fairyland. A marine fairy glen.

Smiling at her flight of fancy, Sophie lifted slim arms above her head and jutted her chest to give her back a good stretch. She’d spent most of the afternoon mixing potions and that always made her back feel twisted in knots. The potions were good though—especially a powerful tincture for Anna Michael’s cramps. Anna had fibroids and, to date, had refused surgery. Sophie didn’t blame her; surgery
was expensive. Most of the people in Bayou Lisse lived paycheck to paycheck, and health insurance was a true luxury. Anna was far too busy looking after four children anyway. Her man was pretty much useless, so everything fell back on her.

“Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young shall see visions,” Sophie’s grandmother said as she settled into the chair next to her.

Beulah Cofe, called Grandam by the members of her family, was a small woman with an abundance of long braided hair, black striped with silver, and deep-set brown eyes that surprised with their occult keenness. She’d been troubled by a series of mild strokes during the past few years so she often had a hard time getting around. Some days she felt stronger than others, and this Sunday had been a good one for her. She’d gone to church, then, after coming home, had helped with dinner. Here it was nigh on ten o’clock and she was still going strong.

“What’s that from? I like that one.” Sophie studied her grandmother. Beulah pulled her worn house sweater close about her neck with sun-spotted hands. “The Bible.”

“And your young shall see visions.” Sophie liked the sound of the words as much as she liked the sentiment the phrase conveyed.

Beulah looked out across the bayou with serene eyes. The water slapped gently against the pilings below their feet. The sound was a comfort to both of them, always had been. “Who were you working this evening?”

“A couple folks.” Sophie paused to chew at a hangnail on her right thumb. “Anna’s fibroids mostly. I sent a little shift to Righteous and Stephen too. I think they’re having trouble again.”

“What’s going on with them?” Beulah waved to one of the otter babies as it slid by below them, moving as if on wheels. In the twilight Sophie couldn’t make out which one it was; there were five that lived below the house.

Sophie sighed. Grandam knew as well as she did how Righteous’s unfaithfulness troubled Stephen.

“You best be working on Clary. Sal’s done gone off and left her with the girls again.”

“No.” Sophie angered immediately upon hearing the news. Clary, their housekeeper, had taken up with Salty Davis about a year ago, and he made a habit of going off from time to time and staying gone for two or three days at a stretch. “That son-of-a-bitch. What does he think he’s doing?”
Beulah screwed up her already wizened features. “I can’t get too riled up, for some reason. The sense on this one won’t go where I want it to. Maybe just a little shift to keep him straight is all that’s needed.”

“Hmmph.” Sophie wasn’t convinced. “You or me?”

Beulah sighed and was quiet a long minute. The swamp filled the silence with insect whir and frog splash. “I’ll get this one. You’re closer to her than I am and have a might bit more attitude.”

Sophie smiled and a small chuckle rose from her. “Nothing wrong with bein’ against injustice, Grandam. I just don’t want nobody doing our Clary wrong.”

“What are you two cooking up out here?” Clary asked as she stepped quietly onto the decking of the porch. “Whenever I hear my name spoken by you two, I start to worry.”

Sophie wondered how much she’d heard. Sometimes Clary moved like a wraith through their small house. “We’re talking about Salty. He doing right by you?”

Clary, wearing cut-off jeans and a pale blue button-down shirt, looked good tonight. She stepped into the sparse light from the bayou, and Sophie could feel Clary’s brown eyes boring into her even though night shadows prevented her from seeing them clearly. Clary moved to the railing and, lifting a leg, rested one side of her bottom on it.

“Only him and the good Lord know the answer to that one. He doesn’t act triflin’, I’ll give him that. Good to me as the day is long. He just…disappears…from time to time. Damned if I know why.” She turned and seemed to peer at something on the water.

The three women stayed that way a long time, allowing the spell of the bayou to wrap them in its peace.

Clary was as much a child of Bayou Lisse as Beulah and Sophie. Born on the water in a houseboat owned by her father, she was part of the close-knit family of the Manu Lisse, which is how outsiders referred to them. No one could posit much on how the Manu Lisse came to be. Some said, predictably, that they were clearly a branch of the Cajun peoples who settled southern Louisiana. Grandam had told Sophie that this was what the Manu allowed the outsiders to think, with a mind leaning toward the less they know the better. The true origin of the Manu was far more intriguing. It was admitted, in hushed whispers, that it was Roma blood that flowed in their veins. They were Gypsies hailing from ancient Egypt and had been brought to Europe as slaves to build the great cities spawning in the cradle of civilization.

How they came to Bayou Lisse had been lost, but Sophie liked to imagine it was settled by a group of friends escaping the religious
persecution of Europe. The beauty of life on the bayou would be a fitting peace after such horrible suffering.

Whatever their origin, the families of the Lisse knew one another by legend if not by sight. Clary’s mother was not unknown to Beulah twenty years ago even though they’d never met. When Beulah was summoned to heal the infected leg of Waverly Evans, she worked diligently to heal the bacterial suppuration left by the suckers of diseased leeches, and the two women discovered an unspoken kinship. Later, when Waverly was on her feet again, her daughter Clary knocked on the door of Salamander House and offered herself to the Cofe family. The Evans family was poor but had many children. Clary was a type of gift, an offering of gratitude. Allowed to freely come and go as she pleased, over the years she had become an indelible part of the Cofe family as well as the Evans, serving as a bridge of kinship between the two clans. Twenty years later, it was as if that barefoot girl in curly ninny tails and buckteeth had never lived apart from the Cofe women.

“There has to be a reason,” offered Beulah. “Just doesn’t make sense. Is he off with his ex-wife?”

“No, Ruth died, remember? Sophie told the girls about it.”

“Right.” Sophie remembered, with a painful lurch of emotion, the day she’d made herself tell Salty’s daughters Sissy, then eleven, and Macy, a baby at three, about their mother’s death from pancreatic cancer. She would never truly forget, no matter how hard she tried, the feel of Macy’s hand, sweltering in disbelief, tugging in her own as she asked Sophie to take her to her mama. Sophie knew she meant the mama she remembered, the plump and sassy woman now wasted and taken by disease. Sophie’s powerlessness had been complete and disturbing.

“I think he’s off doing man things.” Clary sighed as she tilted her head and leaned it against a porch upright.

“Like Kith, you mean?” Sophie watched Clary and noted her nod.

“Maybe. I can’t think what else it would be.”

“It’s not another woman,” Grandam interjected. “I can feel that. He has goodness there.”

“Did you get the potions finished?” Clary allowed one arm to slither along the porch piling. Sophie couldn’t answer because she was busy watching the gracefulness of the movement. “I can run them around for you if you have a heavy day tomorrow.”

Sophie leaned her head against the back of the rocking chair. “You’re a fine woman, Clary Evans, you know that?”
Clary and Beulah broke into low laughter.
Sophie tilted her head to see Grandam’s profile. “What?”
“Fine woman, get me a smoke, will you?” Grandam said to Clary, ignoring Sophie.
Clary, with a smirk of amusement, disappeared inside. She reappeared seconds later reverently carrying one of Beulah’s carefully rationed cigarettes. She handed it to Beulah and leaned to tease at it with a lighter.
“Speaking of cheating men, I saw Larry Hawking’s Avalon parked over at the Quality Inn in Goshen,” she said.
Sophie leaned forward. “No! Was Fritzie’s car there too?” Fritzie Ramsey and Larry had been carrying on for years.
“Of course. Parked around the corner, though.”
“I can’t blame him,” Sophie said quietly.
“Why?” Beulah asked.
“Cancer. Lung. I thought you knew.”
Beulah looked at the cigarette glowing between her fingers. “No. No one told me. How far’s he gone?” She took one more pull, then flicked the cigarette into the water.
“About two months in. I saw him last week.”
“Does Fritzie know, you reckon?” Clary asked. She had remained by the doorway, one hand resting on the jamb.
“Hell, he won’t even talk to Alice about it.”
“He won’t tell his wife? I can’t believe that. They have a lot of business to take care of before he passes.” Beulah moved to rise from her chair and Clary stepped to help her. “You need to talk with him, Sophia.”
“That’s too much meddling for me, Grandam. Let the man die in peace.”
Beulah eyed her granddaughter. “You know there’s no peace after if you don’t leave your family in order. I’m tucking in for the night. You comin’?”
Sophie nodded. “After a swim.”
Grandam blew her a kiss, using her mouth alone. “Mind the gators. Lord mind you,” she said as she and Clary moved into the house.
Sophie felt the reverberation of the slapping screen door as much as heard it. The soft murmur of the two women’s voices carried to her as she stood and absently removed her jeans, T-shirt and underclothing. Naked, her arms and legs glowing ghostlike in the dusk, she made her way along the plank steps and down to the lower landing. Her favorite otter, Astute, chattered to her as he floated by on her left. It was a good
thing he was there; it meant no gators were close. It wasn’t likely one would bother her anyway. The bayou fed them well and it wasn’t her bleeding time.

The shock of the cold water after the heat of the day almost took her breath as she slipped into the shallows by the landing. Moving deeper in, she encountered random warm pockets that comforted her. Tucking her head under, she looked for the fairy villages, trying to follow the light trails as they descended. Though she was diligent, the trails dispersed as she closed in on them and she found only sand and muck. Surfacing, she felt Astute’s hand-like claw against her shoulder, so she turned and made cooing noises at the adolescent creature. He backed off, his prattle giggling at her and she laughed and turned to float on her back. The stars seemed to mock her as they danced in the night sky. She wondered suddenly where the bayou ended and the sky began.
Delora stirred restlessly. She turned and curled onto her side, her right palm automatically coming to rest protectively against the blanket of scar tissue that covered her body from waist to thigh.

She could feel a cool trickle of fluid sledding against the outer lips of her vagina and falling to pool on the sheet under her thighs. It felt pleasant at first, with the same pleasurable release felt when she’d wet the bed as a child. But this wetness was too cold, too foreign so she stirred toward wakefulness, sighing in irritation. She tried to orient herself: naked, in bed, the musty scent of Louie on her. Where was he? Another odor penetrated her dream state, this one harsh and oily, and she felt a stinging sensation as the cool wetness penetrated deep into the tender tissues folded against her groin.

The headache brought about by last night’s case of beer throbbed as she opened her eyes to dawn’s encroachment. Her husband Louie was there, above her, smiling down as if knowing he was finally going to have the last word. His eyes were sorrowful as he watched her, as if he regretted that he was victor. As if he felt sorry for her defeat.

The stick match bloomed in his right hand as his thumb strummed it. He pressed his other hand against her forehead—a benediction crafted to hold her to the bed because he knew that in seconds she would realize the origin of the petroleum smell that was compounding the aching inside her skull. She realized then that it was lighter fluid and knew there was no escape.
The match descended and the final shreds of her hard-won complacency streamed heavenward in an inferno of yellow and blue. At first there was no pain, only amazement that the years of fighting and violence would end in this one act. But as the fire moved inside, discomfort grew into a frenzied pain that snatched her breath away. She knew she would never feel this agony again, and as she thought this thought, the river of fire worked its way deeper inside her body.

Remembered pain seared through Delora’s body, fierce and real. She awakened with a jolt and leapt from the narrow bed, breath rasping harshly from her lungs. She stood in the center of the room, arms hanging loosely at her sides, her hands shaking as she tried to breathe. After a short time, after she had calmed and the sweat had begun evaporating and cooling her body, she made her way into the bathroom. She opened the cabinet under the basin and reached way into the back. There, nestled against the cold water intake, she found a half-full bottle of vodka. She held it pressed to the front of her T-shirt for a few seconds. Without taking her eyes off her reflection in the shadowed mirror, she lifted the bottle of cool vodka to her lips and took a deep pull. She stared into her own eyes for a moment longer thinking how very much like a shark’s eyes they were, dim and lifeless and focused on survival.

* * *

He answered on the first ring. Delora was glad. It meant he was awake and she wasn’t disturbing him. The hoarse whisper of his voice comforted her immediately, irrationally.

She tucked the top sheet tightly around her body and settled onto the bed, the cell phone held delicately in her right hand. “Hey, Bucky.”

“Hey, doll, what’s new?”

“I’m having a bad night,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “Can’t sleep?” His words were slurred, the letters half-pronounced, but Delora could understand him easier than most. In the beginning, she’d had a hard time listening to the distorted words rambling from a mouth that could no longer contain its saliva. There’d been time enough to get used to Bucky Clyde Thorpe’s speech during the months of healing at the Wallace Burn Unit in Mobile, however. They’d become close very quickly and within a few days she could discern his meaning. After just a few weeks she looked forward to hearing his words of comfort and encouragement.
She often wondered what it was about Bucky that drew her. Did his one bright blue eye mesmerize her, peering hawk-like from his pink, shiny face, guessing her every thought even as she thought it? His face was gruesome, actually, with tiny suture scars scattered amid patches of red, raw skin. The eye, though blue and quizzical, always appeared bloodshot, the edges of the eyelid inflamed. His other eye was gone, burned away by the fiery car crash that had taken just about everything else from him. An oval patch of skin sutured over the eye socket tried to provide a type of cosmetic protection but actually imparted an evil asymmetry to his features.

No, there was nothing beautiful about Bucky Clyde, yet she was held spellbound by him, captured by his labored existence and his no-nonsense reality checks. The spell was inescapable, even after two years back at home. She called him almost every day. He was psychologist, mentor and friend. Perhaps the amazing pain he had suffered during his two-year recovery, so much more extreme than her own, had catapulted him into a place both godlike and hellish, a place of supreme knowledge in a mind held captive by a crippled, half-functioning body.

“Sleep? Now, what’s that?” She pulled at short tufts of blond hair with fretful fingers. “Sometimes I still have bad dreams when I sleep.”

“Dreams. Me too.”

She could hear the rasp of his breath as they collectively mulled over the mutual horrors that had changed their lives in just a few short moments. She leaned and pushed a finger against the toenail of her left big toe.

“Is Louie acting up again?”

“No, he’s been pretty calm lately.” She sighed and shifted on the bed. “Rosalie and I had a fight though.”

“You and Rosalie? What about?”

“Stupid shit. The groceries. I hate her so much.”

“I don’t know why you stay there, Del. You need to get away from her. She’s only a foster mom to you.” Anger crept into his voice, making his speech even harsher.

“Yeah. I know.” There was nothing more to say about this. They’d gone over this ground a hundred times. He knew of her Southern Baptist sense of duty. He knew she was still afraid of what Louie might do to her. In fact, Bucky Clyde was the only one she’d told the truth about the fire. How it had been Louie who’d started it by pouring lighter fluid on her.
They calmed again into a companionable silence. An owl called somewhere outside her window and was answered by a low mating warble from deeper inland.

“How are you, Bucky? Did that last surgery give you much relief?”

“Uhmhm. They lengthened some of the skin behind my knee. It had drawn up right tight.” He paused. “You know…”

“What?” She drew her palm across the smooth surface of the sheet. It was soothing.

“I still feel my other leg sometimes. They said all the nerves were gone. I think they grew back.”

“How can you feel something that isn’t there? That’s kind of weird, isn’t it?”

“No, I read that it’s possible. Phantom pain. I really think I have that.”

“So what’s it feel like?”

“Like throbbing. Like blood going through it.”

“I wonder if I could feel my womb,” she mused. “I don’t feel much of anything there anymore.”

“Yeah, all my stuff is gone too.” He laughed ruefully, and Delora blushed, sorry she had brought the subject up.

“I’m sorry, Buck.”

“Me too. I used to like sex.”

“It was okay. I just wish I had the choice again, that’s all.”

“How’s everything at the Blossom?”

Delora thought of the diner where she worked. She thought first about the bright linoleum floor, then about the coffee smell. The fresh-brewed smell, not that sour, old coffee smell. She didn’t much care for that. Or for the bleach smell of the kitchen.

Her co-worker Marina’s face appeared in her mind’s eye. Marina. She was beautiful, exotic, with soft Latin features and a lithe, tanned body.

“Delora?”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” She spent some time telling him about how the sun rose in iridescent stages that morning as she watched it through the eastern-facing kitchen windows. She didn’t mention Marina.

“That sounds good,” he said. “I wish I could have seen it.”

“Me too. I really miss you.”

“I’m sure you don’t miss seeing me every day.”

She heard him rise and hop, carrying his cell phone. “It’s true, you’re not very pretty, but then neither am I.”
“Don’t say that. Hey, Bonnie came to see me today. She brought me chocolates.”
“Sounds like things are getting serious.”
Bucky laughed. “Nah, she ate most of them.”
“You said she was a healthy girl.” Delora lifted one of her own slim legs and stared at it.
“She is. Fleshy.”
“What?” She couldn’t understand this word as it wasn’t one he used often.
“Fleshy. To make up for what I lost.”
“Oh, flesh. I get it.” She yawned and tried to muffle it. “I guess I better get some sleep if I can. I have Blossom’s in the morning and the club tomorrow night.”
“How late?”
“You mean the French Club? Usually about two in the morning.”
“Then you get up again?”
She laughed. “Yep. Opening Blossom’s at six.”
“I don’t get it, Delora. You could move away from there and do something sane.”
“Sane?”
“Yeah, sane. Like work one job. Like finding someone who really cares about you.”
“I know.”
The silence grew and Delora began to feel like she could breathe again.
“You know the door here is always open.”
She thought of the little two-room apartment in Myrtle Beach that he’d described to her and the sudden love she felt for him made her heart pound. “Thank you, honey. I’ll remember that.”
“Goodnight, Delora. Love you bunches.”
“You too. Sleep. I’ll call you tomorrow.”
Peepers frogs called loudly to one another and the sound seemed to swell and fill the room when his voice no longer sounded in Delora’s ear. Reaching up, she switched off the light and let their arrhythmic song lull her to sleep.